

Author's Note: This a completely different AU fic I am writing, since I felt my old one wasn't any good and too much like the first book, just with Neville added to Harry's group of friends and Sirius out of prison and married. My old fic has been deleted and this new one will take it's place.

Disclaimer for entire fic: I, sadly, do not own Harry Potter. If I did, I would be rich, living in a huge mansion, writing books and doing charitable causes, and not be spending my time writing fanfiction.

Joyce Cornelia Stenson was perched in a tree in her night Animagus form of an owl. She had flown all the way to Privet Drive in the afternoon in her day Animagus form of a hawk when she had heard the news that her friends Lily and James Potter were dead. That was when she spotted a tabby cat sitting on a brick wall and recognized her to be the Animagus form Professor Minerva McGonagall, the Transfiguration teacher at Hogwarts. Joyce knew that Professor McGonagall could only be at Privet Drive, where Lily's horrid sister, husband, and son lived, on Dumbledore's orders.

The afternoon spent hiding in a nearby tree had told her what sort of Muggles the Dursleys were. She had an idea that they weren't very nice, since Lily had said that her sister Petunia had hated her ever since she had gotten her Hogwarts letter, and Petunia's husband, Vernon Dursley was just as bad. Their son, Dudley, was a very fat and very spoiled toddler of one year and few months old. In fact, Joyce had spotted Petunia Evans Dursley carrying Dudley up to street toward their home, him kicking his mother and wailing for sweets the entire time.

When night came, Joyce had to change into her owl form, for a hawk was useless in the dark. It could certainly hear better than humans, but its sight was only a little better than a human's in the dark. She fortunate that she was one of the few people that had more than one Animagus form, mainly because she required a day and night form. McGonagall only had the one form of a cat, as that was animal that was suited for both night and day.

At around midnight, a wizard silently appeared in Privet Drive and Joyce was instantly able to recognize him as Albus Dumbledore,

headmaster of Hogwarts. He took out a Put-Outer, and used it to make all the street lights magically vanish. This did not bother her, since as an owl she could see perfectly well in the dark, and much better than a human. She watched and listened as McGonagall transformed into her normal self, Dumbledore confirmed the fact that Lily and James were dead and that Voldemort was defeated since he couldn't manage to kill their son Harry, and that Harry would have to live with his aunt and uncle.

McGonagall protested that, pointing out that the Dursleys were nothing like them, and that it not a fit place for Harry to live. Dumbledore merely informed her that Harry would be safer here, as it was the best place for him, and that it would be better if he wasn't exposed to being famous in the wizarding world until he was old enough to handle it. Then Dumbledore revealed that Hagrid, gameskeeper of Hogwarts, would be bringing Harry. Sure enough, Hagrid appeared a minute later, carrying Harry and riding a flying motorbike, which Sirius Black, James' best friend, had lent him.

Hagrid burst into loud sobs at having to leave Harry at the Dursleys, but then managed to control himself. Dumbledore placed the bundle that was Harry on the doorstep of the Dursley's house, and then on top put the letter that explained everything. After, Hagrid, McGonagall (who was looking a bit teary and blew her nose loudly), and Dumbledore all left, first having the lights go back to the street lights. Once the three had all left, Joyce made her move.

She flew down to the doorstep, transformed back into human, and picked up Harry Potter. Contrary to what Dumbledore had said, she was not going to let Harry be brought up at the Dursleys. They would no doubt call him a freak and neglect him emotionally, perhaps even physically. However, Dumbledore did have a point in not wanting Harry to be exposed to fame at an early age and wanting him to be safe. She swiftly made her decision, then holding Harry and the letter in her arms, Apparated.

An instant and a half later, she appeared in front of the neat little cottage in a clearing in the woods that she had inherited from her grandmother. Looks were deceiving, however, for on the inside, the cottage was actually a very large house. Joyce reactivated all the

wards that were originally on the house, and then went inside. Harry woke up then and began to cry.

"Hush, Harry," said Joyce soothingly. "Your Aunt Lia's here." She smiled at him and he settled down.

She knew that once Dumbledore knew that Harry was gone, he would go searching for the child. If he found out Harry was with her, he would not be pleased and would take him away. Therefore, it would be best if she didn't use her first name, but her middle name, Lia for short. Nobody knew her middle name, other than James and Lily, who were dead, her parents, also dead, and Sirius Black. Sirius was alive, but he had sworn never to reveal her middle name, so she was safe there, too. Nobody would connect "Lia" to her, except possibly Sirius, and that wasn't very likely.

Lia went upstairs and discovered a new room had appeared. Her grandmother's house did things like that frequently. If a new room was needed, it would appear, and if it wasn't it would disappear. She went inside the new room and found it to be furnished as a very nice nursery. She sat down in the rocky chair and rocked Harry until he fell asleep again, then placed him in the crib. "I hope you'll like living here with Aunt Lia, Harry," she said softly. "You'll certainly like it better here than you would have at the Dursleys."

Lia then tiptoed out the room and went into her own bedroom, which was right next door so she could hear if Harry woke up again. After brushing her teeth and changing into her nightclothes, she collapsed into her bed and soon fell asleep.

Author's Note: From now on, the character of Joyce Stenson will be known by her middle name of Cornelia, Lia for short, or by Aunt Lia by Harry and his future adopted siblings.

A two year old Harry sat in his high chair in the kitchen, being fed by Aunt Lia. "Come on, Harry. Open your mouth wide and let the ariplane in!" She waved the spoon around carefully, like a plane flying, then Harry obligingly opened his mouth. The spoonful of food popped into his mouth and he began chewing his food, then swallowing.

Harry giggled, then reached his hand out for the spoon. "Me feed self!" Lia shook his head, for the last time she had let Harry feed himself, it had been a complete mess. More food fell on the tray or the ground that in his mouth, and once, he accidentally flung a spoonful of food on Lia's blouse. Right after that, she had decided that it was enough and used her wand to clean up the mess, including the stain on her clothes. Harry had not been allowed to feed himself ever since.

Harry did not like being told no and began shouting, "Me feed self!"

"No, Harry," said Lia firmly. "You're just going to make a mess again. When you're older, you can feed yourself." She sighed, wondering if motherhood was worth it. Had she been like that once to her parents, wanting to feed herself and making messes? And there was potty training, which Harry was also going through right now.

Finally Lia got Harry fed, then put him down in his crib for a nap. After he was sleep, she went downstairs and summoned Kana, the house-elf. "Harry's taking a nap now, Kana. Could you clean up the kitchen, please?"

Kana was part of the house and Lia had decided to keep her, especially when she realized what a big job looking after a baby and toddler was. Lia did not treat Kana the way most house-elves were treated, however. She had given Kana several outfits to wear, consisting of cap, blouse, skirt, and apron, and always said please and thank-you to her. Her duties were not at all onerous, and Kana had the complete freedom to call her mistress names if she wanted.

Kana did not have to punish herself at all, but if she felt she needed punishment, she told Lia, who then gave her an extra chore to do.

After half an hour, Lia checked in on Harry to make sure he was still asleep, then left for her weekly visit to see what Dumbledore was up to. So far, Dumbledore hadn't realized that Harry was at the Dursleys, but he would soon. Mrs. Figgs, a Squib and member of the Order, had moved near Privet Drive to keep an eye on Harry. Eventually she would notice that Harry wasn't there and report it to Dumbledore, who would then investigate it.

She landed on the windowsill of Dumbledore's office as a hawk and watched through the window. Dumbledore was busy reading a book. After an hour, the fireplace flared up and a head appeared. Dumbledore got up and hurried over to the fire. Thanks to the hawk's keen hearing, Lia heard every word.

"Dumbledore, I'm starting to wonder if Harry is at the Dursleys at all. I've noticed lately that Mr. and Mrs. Dursley frequently take their son out, but I've never seen Harry."

"That is not good, Arabella," said Dumbledore. "But it could be that they are taking Harry's safety seriously and aren't letting him out of the house until he has to go to school. Still, I will have it checked into, just in case."

Lia watched and finally saw that McGonagall was to be dispatched to check on the Dursleys. Lia quickly flew into Hogsmeade, transformed back into human, and Apparated to Privet Drive. She then turned back into a hawk and hid in a nearby tree, where she could see and hear everything. Not long after, McGonagall appeared and rang the doorbell. Petunia Dursley answered the door.

"Hello, what is it you want?" she asked politely.

"I am Professor Minerva McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts," responded McGonagall. "I am here about your nephew Harry."

Petunai's face turned pale and she was about to slam the door, but McGonagall stopped her. " Almost a year ago, on Halloween, Lily and James Potter were murdered. Their son, Harry was brought to you and left on your doorstep for you to take in. A letter explaining everything was left, too."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" snapped Petunia. "No baby was left on my doorstep, not even a freak one! Now leave the premises immediately!"

"At least let me search the house to make sure Harry Potter isn't in here," said McGonagall. "Then I will leave."

Petunia looked even more angry, but she reluctantly let McGonagall inside. When a search of the house proved that the only child in there was Dudley, McGonagall left. Lia Apparated to Hogsmeade, then flew to Dumbledore's office. Through the window, she saw McGonagall enter and tell Dumbledore that Harry was not at the Dursleys. Dumbledore suddenly looked very odd and said, "Now what do we do? the savior of the wizarding world has disappeared."

Lia Apparated back home. Well, the wards on her house would hold, but it would be best if she put Harry's and hers whereabouts under the Fidelus Charm. She did so, then began composing a short letter to Dumbledore assuring him that Harry was all right.

"Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I have Harry. After you left him on the Dursley's doorstep, I came and took him away. He is now being brought up with me and will have a much better life than he would have had with his aunt and uncle. Do not attempt to find him, for his whereabouts is concealed by a Fidelus Charm and I am not going to tell you where he is.

Suffice it to say that Harry is safe as I can make it and will not come to any harm. You may or may not see Harry again when he is eleven, depending on whether or not Harry attends Hogwarts or if I send him to an American school.

Sincerely yours,

J. S.

P.S. I am writing this letter to you to assure you that Harry is safe, since you have no doubt by now discovered he's not at the Dursleys."

Dumbledore might figure out that the initials J.S. stood for Joyce Stenson, but he still wouldn't be able to find her. She then took the letter and Apparated to Hogsmeade. Once there, she transformed into her owl form and flew to Hogwarts, carrying the letter in her beak. While Lia was registered as an Animagus, only her day form of a hawk was public. She had not revealed that she also had an owl form to be on the safe side, so Dumbledore would not recognize her.

Once she arrived at the window to Dumbledore's office, she began tapping at window to demand entrance. After a minute, Dumbledore opened the window and she flew in, dropping the letter on his desk and hooting. He gazed up at her, frowning, then picked up the letter and read it. His brow furrowed even more as he read and when he finished, he sighed and said, "This is unexpected. Who is this J. S. that took Harry? I suspect it's Joyce Stenson, for she has disappeared ever since Lily and James died."

He took out a sheet of parchment and began writing. When he finished, he folded it up and handed it to Lia. "Take this to your mistress, please." She blinked, then flew out of the room.

Once back home, she read the letter.

"Dear J. S.,

What you are doing is very wrong. Harry is protected at the Dursleys, or he would have been if you hadn't taken him away. If you are Joyce Stenson, as I suspect, you therefore know that Lily sacrificed herself for Harry. Wards were put on the Dursley home and as long as his aunt will still be alive, he would have blood protection, since his aunt and mother share the same blood.

I have no idea as to where you live, and since you are under the Fidelus Charm, putting a tracking spell on your owl is no use, though

it would show me the general area as to where you live. In any case, I beg of you to see me and have Harry be returned to the home he should be living in, at his aunt and uncles. You may be reluctant to give up Harry, but it's for his own good. You may have wards and the Fidelus Charm on your own house, but the Dursley's house is even safer, especially with the blood protection. Please consider what I have written.

Yours truly,

Albus Dumbledore"

Lia frowned. She was most certainly not going to be giving Harry up. She quickly wrote a reply letter.

"Dear Professor Dumbledore,

I am not this Joyce Stenson you think I am. In fact, I am not even female. I am merely someone who cares for Harry and knows that the Dursleys are unfit people to raise him. He is safe with me, and will not have to deal with any nonsense over being famous until he attends Hogwarts or some other magical school.

I have no intention of revealing myself to you or giving Harry up. He will live with me, and there is nothing more to be said on the subject. Do not bother sending replies, for my owl will leave as soon as this letter is delivered, and no owl you send will find me, for it is very well hidden.

Sincerely,

J. S."

This letter she sent by her owl, Sapphire, since she didn't care to stick around and see Dumbledore's reaction to the second letter. Dumbledore's letter she burned, on the off chance that it was spelled in any way to locate her. Lia was aware that she had lied in the reply letter about her name and gender, but she needed to throw Dumbledore off the track.



Harry woke up then, so the rest of the afternoon was spent in keeping Harry occupied with toys and teaching him to recite the alphabet.

Harry was now three years old and sitting Lia's lap as a story was being read to him. He could now count to ten and was learning to count to twenty, could recite the alphabet, and was now learning to recognize the letters. He pointed to the letter 's' and said loudly, "S!"

"Yes, dear, that is the letter 'S'," said Lia smiling. "That begins the word Sister."

Harry nodded and pointed to the illustration of a bear wearing a pink and white outfit. "That's Sister Bwear! Aunt Lia, can I have a sister?"

Aunt Lia looked thoughtfully at Harry. It wasn't a bad idea, since he could use some companionship, and it would help him get used to having other children around him when time came for him to attend Hogwarts. Though where in the world did Harry get an idea like that? Perhaps reading books like The Berenstain Bears that had brothers and sisters in them had given him that idea.

"All right, Harry," she finally answered, "Having a sister is a good idea."

"Want bwuvver, too," said Harry, pointing at the illustration of Brother Bear.

"Fine, Harry, you can have a brother as well," said Lia.

Now the problem was getting a brother and sister for Harry. She certainly couldn't have any kids of her own, since she wasn't married, and she had no wish to do so ever since Sirius Black was wrongly accused of betraying the Potters and killing Peter Pettigrew and twelve Muggles and got sent to Azkaban. Her only option was to adopt, and she decided to comb the orphanages and adoption agencies in Britain, and America if need be, for orphaned children around Harry's age that were magic. She could adopt nonmagical children, but they'd feel left out when Harry went to Hogwarts and they couldn't, so magical children would be better.

A few weeks later, Lia said, "Harry dear, I'm going to look for a brother and sister for you. I will be away from a few hours every day, so Kana will take care of you. You are to whatever she says, okay?"

"Kay," replied Harry, not looking up from the tower of blocks he was building.

Lia Apparated to the first orphanage on her list, St. Margerat's Home for Orphaned and Abandoned Children. It was a big, imposing brick building with an iron fence surrounding it and did not look at all cheerful. A maid answered the door and led her to the director's office. The director, a middle-aged lady with graying black hair done in a bun, kind blue eyes, and rectangular spectacles that made her look strict, smiled, and nodded Lia to the chair in front of her desk.

"I am Mrs. Elliot," she said. "Now, who are you and are you here to adopt a child?"

"I am Miss Cornelia Stenson," Lia responded. "Two years ago, I adopted the son of a distant cousin of mine. Lately he has expressed a wish to have a brother or sister, and since I am not married, adoption is the only choice to provide him with one."

Mrs. Elliot nodded. "Did you bring your adopted child with you, Miss Stenson?"

"No, I left him at home with my housekeeper. However, if there is any child at St. Margerat's that I wish to adopt, I will bring Harry with me so he can see if he wants this new brother or sister."

"Do you have any specific age group you wish to see?" asked Mrs. Elliot.

"I think somewhere between two and four, so Harry will have someone his age to play with," answered Lia. "Oh, have any of the children here done any odd and unexplainable things?"

"Unless you count Jerry's liking for pickles at every meal, I don't think so," replied Mrs. Elliot. "Oh, wait, Ariel is very protective of her younger sister and I suppose some odd things happened whenever she's defending her sister Valancy."

Lia looked interested in these words. "How old are Ariel and Valancy? And I would like to see them."

"They're very young," said Mrs. Elliot. "Ariel is almost four, and Valancy just turned two." She led Lia to the playroom where the younger children and toddlers played.

A little girl of two with curly blonde hair was wailing loudly. An older girl of about three or four with wavy red hair shouted, "Give my sister back the doll!"

Another girl of three, with brown hair, was holding a doll and shouted back. "No! That's my doll!"

"She was playing with it first!" shouted the older girl. "You can't take it!"

Mrs. Elliot frowned. "Where is Alice? She's supposed to be here to keep an eye on things." She hurried over to break up the fight just as a wooden block flew up in the air and knocked the three-year old on the head. She promptly dropped the doll and began crying loudly, rubbing her head. The older girl dived for the doll and handed it to her sister, who stopped crying.

Lia could see right away that the red-haired girl was magic. Mrs. Elliot quickly soothed the girl that was crying, then scolded Ariel for shouting and hitting Janet with a block.

Ariel snapped, "I didn't touch the block, Mrs. Elliot! It flew up by itself, like magic!"

"Magic isn't real," said Mrs. Elliot gently. "Now say you're sorry to Janet for hitting her with the block."

"Sorry," muttered Ariel.

Mrs. Elliot smiled and then turned to Janet. "Now Janet, you shouldn't have taken the doll from Val when she was playing with it. I want you to say you're sorry to her."

"Sowee, Val," muttered Janet.

"Good," said Mrs. Elliot. "Miss Stenson, come on over." She introduced Ariel and Valancy Kennedy, then told the two sisters that Lia was here to adopt.

After a few minutes conversation, Lia was certain that she wanted to adopt the two sisters. Ariel definitely was showing signs of magic. Valancy hadn't, but she wasn't about to separate the two. Lia then turned to Mrs. Elliot. "Tomorrow I'll bring Harry with me so he can meet Ariel and Valancy. If he likes them, I will definitely be adopting them."

"That's wonderful!" exclaimed Mrs. Elliot. Lia then looked over the three boys in the room, but none of them had any signs of magic, so she left and Apparated to another orphanage. A look at the children between the ages of two and four showed that none of them had any signs of magic, either. For the next three days, Lia combed every orphanage in Britain, but other than the first one, there were no children who were magical. She had even searched among the five and six-year olds, with no luck.

On the fourth day, Lia brought Harry with her to St. Margerat's to meet Valancy and Ariel. He got along quite well with the two girls and spent a blissful hour playing with them. With a touch of her magic, Lia was able to sign the adoption papers and get through the process of checking up on the prospective parent very quickly. She then collected Harry, Ariel, and Valancy and took them to her house. Since there was a Fidelus Charm on her home, she first had to tell Ariel and Valancy the location before they were able to see the cottage. Ariel looked at it skeptically. "Miss Stenson, the house is small!"

"It's small on the outside, dear, but on the inside, it's big," said Lia. "And please just call me Aunt Lia." She led the three kids inside and showed Ariel and Valancy to their bedroom. The two could have had separate rooms, but Lia had decided it would be best to wait awhile until they had gotten used to things. Also, she doubted they would want to be separated at the moment.

Ariel and Valancy got a very big shock when they met Kana. Harry said, "That's Kana. She a house-elf."

Valancy stared wide-eyed at Kana, then said, "Hewo, Kana. Me Val-an-see."

Ariel looked up at Lia. "Miss-I mean Aunt Lia, what's a house-elf? Why haven't I seen one before?"

"A house-elf is a creature that works for a wizarding family or person," explained Lia. "He or she is like a servant. You haven't seen one before because they don't show themselves to Muggles."

"Muggles?" asked Ariel, frowning at this strange and new word.

"Muggle is a word that means non-magic person, Ariel. You see, magic does exist, but Muggles like Mrs. Elliot don't know about it." Lia pulled out her wand and levitated one of Harry's books to demonstrate.

Ariel and Valancy stared, awed. "Is me a Muggin?" asked Valancy.

"It's Muggle, Val," corrected Lia. "I don't know. Ariel, you have magic, so it is possible that your sister is magic, too."

"Am I a witch?" asked Ariel. "Like the one in the stories, Aunt Lia?"

"Not exactly," answered Lia. "The witches in stories are usually evil, but you are good. Though in the magical world, there are evil witches and wizards. But most of them are good."

"Like Merlin," said Ariel. "Miss Alice told me the story about him."

"Yes, like Merlin," smiled Lia. She began explaining about the magic world to Ariel, Harry, and Valancy.

The next day, Lia discovered that there was an orphanage in Northern Ireland that she hadn't visited, so she went there. One look at the building and director told her that it wasn't a nice place. The building was bleak, and the director a very stern and forbidding man.

There was no playground in the back like the other orphanages she visited, and the children slept in long dormitories with very plain iron beds with lumpy mattresses and thin blankets. The children themselves looked cowed, except for a few that still had a spark of defiance in their eyes.

One boy of about Harry's age was cowered in a corner and the director hastily explained, "Nicolas is having a time out because he's been naughty."

Lia bent down to him and quietly asked, "What did you do that made you naughty?"

The boy, looking scared, whispered, "A bowl of soup fell on Mr. Jenkins' lap. But I didn't touch it!"

"He's always doing odd things," said Mr. Jenkins, frowning. "Says he doesn't touch things, but they still fall on me and hit me and whatnot."

Lia figured out that Nicolas was doing magic and immediately went through the process of adopting him. She then wrote a check for five thousand pounds to the orphanage and informed Mr. Jenkins that he was to use the money to make changes around the orphanage. She added that she would come by in a few months to make sure the changes were made. If they weren't, she would not be donating in the future. With that, she took Nicolas Smith and Apparated home.

Author's Note: I've changed Valancy's birthday since I decided to have each of them born in a different season. I have also changed the woods of Ariel's and Nick's wands to reflect their birthdays. This is gotten off J.K. Rowling's website. For reference, Ariel's birthday is September 20th, and Nick's birthday is April 2nd.

(Skip forward almost eight years)

"Harry James Potter-Stenson, give me back my diary!" shouted Ariel, chasing after her foster-brother.

"Not until I read it!" returned Harry, running down the stairs. He flipped it open and began reading as he ran, "May 17th, Dear Diary, Sometimes having a brother like Harry is a pain. Why can't he be like Nick, who doesn't tease me so much or take my things all the time?"

In the living room, he stopped and turned to glare at Ariel, who had just dashed in. "Hey! Don't write such things about me!"

"I wouldn't if you weren't such a pain in the neck half the time!" snapped Ariel. "And you're not supposed to read my diary! It's private! I don't go around reading your journal!"

Valancy led Aunt Lia in. "All right, what is going on?" asked Aunt Lia. "Why are you shouting, Ariel?"

"Harry took my diary to read my private entries, Aunt Lia!" shouted Ariel.

"Calm down, Ariel," said Aunt Lia. "Harry, return the diary. And for taking it, no watching the telly today." She had installed a telly after Harry had asked for one after reading *The Berenstain Bears* and *Too Much T.V.* and the three others had seconded the request. She had also gotten a VCR and the four kids could watch two hours of the telly every day, three hours if it was rainy outside, and a movie every Friday night or on a rainy day.

"But what do I do about my diary?" asked Ariel. "Harry somehow found my hiding spot, Aunt Lia."



Aunt Lia sighed and took the diary. She tapped it with her wand, then said, "I've put a spell so that nobody else can open it except for you. You just tap it and say your password. And it's voice activated, so if Harry or somebody else were to figure out your password, they still wouldn't be able to open it to read since it's not your voice."

"Oh, thank you, Aunt Lia!" exclaimed Ariel. She took her diary and ran from the living room.

Harry got sent to his room for the next two hours while the others watched the telly. During dinner, he apologized to Ariel for taking her diary. She gave him a look, then said, "Apology accepted. Now please try to be nice like you were when we were younger, Harry."

Valancy sighed loudly and decided to change the subject. "Aunt Lia, when will I get my Hogwarts letter?"

"Not until next year, dear," responded Aunt Lia. "You have to be eleven to attend Hogwarts, and you've only turned ten on January 13th this year."

"It's not fair!" exclaimed Valancy, pouting. "I wish I could go this year. Ariel, Harry, and Nick get to go this year."

"That's because we're all a year or a year and a half older than you," said Nick. "Val, it's only a year. It's not like you're several years younger than us."

"But I want to be with you guys!" snapped Valancy, not appeased.

"You'll be with us next year," said Ariel. "And we swear we'll write to you often while we're at Hogwarts. We'll tell you everything that's going on, Val, and the year will go by quickly."

Harry looked toward Aunt Lia. "How will I get my letter? I'm under the Fidelus Charm, remember?"

"It's been fixed. A letter for Harry Stenson will arrive. I've told Dumbledore that I've adopted four kids from various orphanages and that you were found on the doorstep of one. The people there

decided to name you Harry Smith and when I adopted you, I gave you my last name. Nobody will know who you really are, and a few spells will disguise your appearance. Your scar will be hidden, your eyes will have some hazel added to it, and your hair will be made a brown-black instead of raven-black. Oh, and a spell will tame your hair somewhat. Nothing can make it completely neat and have it lie flat, but there are spells and potions that can make it somewhat neater."

"What about my glasses?" asked Harry. "You said my dad wore glasses and people might realize who I really am if-"

"Remember those potions you had to take and that spell I did which made your eyesight better?" interrupted Aunt Lia. "We'll resume the potions so you won't have to wear glasses. And next year, you can get contacts."

"But what if someone suspects that Harry Stenson is really Harry Potter?" asked Nick.

"That's why you've learned Occulemency," said Aunt Lia. "Dumbledore is ethical about using Legilimency, but if he suspected, he might decide to take a peek in your minds to make sure. And Snape, the Potions Master, isn't going to have much in the way of ethics on using Legilimency, so he could decide to peek in your minds if Dumbledore won't. If you decide that you want your friends to know the truth, you had better teach them Occulemency first so nobody will look through their mind and find the truth."

"But won't Dumbledore wonder where Harry is?" asked Ariel.

"I will send Professor Dumbledore a letter saying that Harry is attending a magical school in America, since that's where he lives," said Aunt Lia. "That will throw him off the track. Now hurry up and finish your supper, the four of you."

A month later, toward the end of July, three Hogwarts letters arrived, addressed to Mr. H. Stenson, Mr. N. Stenson, and Miss A. Kennedy. They were all very happy to be accepted into Hogwarts and asked Aunt Lia when they could go to Diagon Alley.

"How about on Harry's birthday?" she suggested. "We can go in the morning, and then have his party in the afternoon." They agreed to the idea and Flooed to Diagon Alley right after breakfast on July 31.

First was a stop to Gringotts to get money from Aunt Lia's vault. The four children gazed in awe at the building and goblins. Nick, Harry, and Ariel enjoyed the cart ride down to the vault, but Valancy didn't and almost got sick when they arrived.

Inside the vault were piles of galleons, stacks of sickles, and mounds of knuts. Ariel gasped, "I didn't realize you had this much money, Aunt Lia!" They had gone to Diagon Alley several times before, but the children had never been inside Gringotts. Aunt Lia smiled and swept some of the money into her purse, then counted out twenty galleons, thirty sickles, and fifteen knuts for each of them.

"This is your spending money," she said. They climbed back into the cart and went up. In the lobby, they met Hagrid, who was the gameskeeper of Hogwarts.

He was introduced to the four kids, and said cheerfully, "Yeh're welcome to visit me down at me hut." He then winked at Aunt Lia and said, "It's nice seein' yeh again, Joyce. It's bin ten years, hasn't it?"

"Yes, it is, Hagrid," said Lia, smiling. "I'm sure we'll be seeing each other more often from now on. Oh, why are you here at Gringotts?"

"I'm 'ere to pick up somethin' fer Dumbledore," answered Hagrid. "Somethin' secret that I can't tell yeh abou'." He turned to the goblin at the desk and handed him a note. "It's abou' the you-know-what in Vault seven hundred an' thirteen."

Naturally, the four kids were curious as to what Hagrid had to get, but Lia forbid them from asking questions and hustled them out of Gringotts. First they went to Flourish and Blotts to purchase the books. Nick and Ariel, who loved to read, picked up some extra books for background reading. Harry picked up a couple of extra books, also, but not as many as Nick and Ariel, because his fondness for reading wasn't as much as theirs. Valancy pouted at not being able to attend

Hogwarts yet, but she did purchase Hogwarts, a History and a couple of other books.

At the Apothecary, Valancy continued pouting as the others bought their potion supplies, until Aunt Lia told her stop and told her that she could help with making potions at home. She was further appeased when Aunt Lia bought her a kit complete with potions supplies and her very own cauldron. The four kids then stopped to look at the new Nimbus Two Thousand at Quality Quidditch Supplies while Lia purchased their cauldrons.

"Aunt Lia, can I have the Nimbus Two Thousand?" asked Harry on their way to Madam Malkin's Robes For All Occasions.

"Harry, you have a perfectly good broom already," said Aunt Lia. "Your Cleansweep Four should do you very well at the moment. And besides, first years aren't allowed brooms at Hogwarts, and it's very unlikely that you'd make a house team."

"But it's my birthday, Aunt Lia," pleaded Harry.

"I am not going to buy you a broom right now," said Lia firmly. "Furthermore, the presents I have ready for your birthday are at home, waiting for you to open them at your birthday party. I am not going to buy you another present and spoil you."

At Madam Malkin's, a boy with a pale, pointed face and very pale blond hair was also waiting to be fitted for Hogwarts robes. Lia frowned when she saw him, but didn't say anything.

Ariel was called up to be fitted right after the boy with the pale face was called up.

"Hullo," said the boy, "Hogwarts too?"

"Yes," said Ariel, glancing at the boy.

"My father's next door buying my books and mother's up the street looking at wands," said the boy. He had a bored, drawling voice. "Then I'm going to drag them off to look at racing brooms. I don't see

why first-years can't have their own. I think I'll bully father into getting me one and I'll smuggle it in somehow."

Ariel frowned, for this boy reminded her of a spoiled kid in a book she'd read. "There must be a good reason for the rule. Muggleborns don't learn how to fly until flying class, so it's probably best that they don't get a broom beforehand. And to make it fair, the non-Muggleborns won't be allowed brooms, either."

The pale boy gave her a look. "Well, that sort shouldn't be allowed at Hogwarts. I think they should keep it to old wizarding families, don't you?"

Ariel knew that she definitely didn't like this boy at all. He had obviously been brought up to think Muggleborns were little better than animals and believe in pureblood supremacy. "Well, I don't, whomever you are. Muggleborns have every right to attend Hogwarts or any other magical school. I expect you'll be sorted into Slytherin, then."

"Yes," he answered. "My entire's family been."

"Well, I hope to be in any house but Slytherin!" snapped Ariel. "Loyalty, cleverness, and courage is much better than cunning and a bias against Muggleborns!"

"How dare you talk that way to a Malfoy!" gasped the boy.

"I can talk to you however I want," returned Ariel, nettled. "I don't think much of the Malfoy family. Your father was probably a Death Eater, but wiggled his way out of Azkaban."

The Malfoy boy opened his mouth to reply, but Madam Malkin said just then, "That's you done, my dear." Ariel thanked her and hopped off from the stool, relieved at having an excuse to leave.

Nick's turn was next and Malfoy glanced at him. "Hullo, I hope you'll be more my type than that girl-"

"That girl happens to be my foster-sister," snapped Nick.

"Foster-sister?" asked Malfoy, frowning.

"Yes," he said shortly. "Our parents died and Aunt Lia adopted us." Nick turned his face away and ignored Malfoy until he was done and left the shop. Harry took Malfoy's place and Nick briefly told him about the encounter with the pale boy.

On the way out the shop, Ariel told the others about the conversation she had with Malfoy. Aunt Lia frowned and warned them to be careful about the Malfoy family. Then they headed to Ollivander's Wand Shop. Mr. Ollivander was a somewhat creepy old man with silvery eyes. He nodded at Lia and said, "Ah, Joyce Stenson. A pleasure to see you again. You would be hazel, unicorn hair, eleven inches, right?" Lia nodded and he turned to the kids. "So the four of you need wands?"

"Actually, only three of us do," answered Harry. "My sister Val doesn't start Hogwarts until next year." He gestured at Valancy.

Mr. Ollivander gave Harry a penetrating look, then at the others. "The four of you look nothing alike, except for the girls."

"Ariel and I are blood sisters," said Valancy. "The four of us are adopted, Mr. Ollivander."

"I see," he said, nodding. "You wand arm, Mr-?"

"Harry Stenson," replied Harry. "My wand arm is the right one."

"And yours, Mr-?"

"Nicolas Stenson," responded Nick. "I'm left-handed."

"And now Miss Ariel Stenson," said Mr. Ollivander.

"It's Kennedy, not Stenson, and the right arm," answered Ariel. A tape measure flew up and began measuring their arms. Mr. Ollivander brought down some boxes, then asked Nick to step forward.

"Rowan, dragon heartstring, ten inches, Mr. Stenson. Go on, give it a wave." Nick took the wand, but in the next instant, Mr. Ollivander grabbed it and handed him another wand, this one willow, unicorn hair, nine-and-a-half inches. After eleven more wands, Nick was given a wand of alder, dragon heartstring, twelve inches. As soon as he touched the wand, he felt a warmth going down his arm and spreading to the rest of his body and red and gold sparks shot out of the wand.

"Oh, bravo!" exclaimed Mr. Ollivander. "You have found the perfect wand. Miss Kennedy, you're next." He handed Ariel the first wand that had been discarded for Nick. It took longer for her and she had to go through twenty-three wands until she came to the perfect one. It was vine wood, unicorn hair, ten-and-a-half inches and the same reaction happened to her, only green sparks came out from her wand. She frowned a bit at that, since green was Slytherin's color, then shrugged, deciding it wasn't Slytherin green, but a different shade of green that went well with her red hair.

Last was Harry and he turned out to be, in Mr. Ollivander's words, "a tricky customer." It took Harry a very long time to find his wand and he must have tried just about every wand in the shop, except for the one resting on a pillow in the window. Finally Mr. Ollivander brought out a wand. "This one is holly, phoenix feather, eleven inches." When Harry took the wand, he felt a warmth traveling through his body and as he waved it, scarlet sparks shot out.

Ariel became worried and whispered to Aunt Lia, "Is my getting green sparks bad? Harry and Nick both got Gryffindor colors, but I got the Slytherin colors."

"Don't worry, dear," soothed Aunt Lia. "I got blue sparks coming out my wand when I first touched it, but I was sorted into Gryffindor. It didn't mean I was going to be in Ravenclaw, so you're getting green doesn't mean you'll be in Slytherin."

Ariel looked happier and turned her attention to Mr. Ollivander, who was frowning at Harry. "Curious. The wand you chose. Or rather, the wand that chose you. It and another wand are brothers. Yew, phoenix feather, thirteen-and-a-half inches. It was the wand I sold to He-Who-

Must-Not-Be-Named. The core of his wand and the core of yours came from the same phoenix."

Harry shivered a little and asked, "So my wand and Voldemort's wand are brothers. What does this mean?"

"I am not certain," replied Mr. Ollivander. "But why did this wand choose you?"

"I don't know," responded Harry. "It's not like I'm the Boy-Who-Lived or something."

"Maybe you are," said Mr. Ollivander suddenly.

"I adopted Harry from an orphanage," said Lia. "He had been found on the doorstep and as there was no name pinned to his blanket, the people at the orphanage gave him the name of Harry Smith and determined that his birthday was either in June or July."

"It could be Harry Potter," said Mr. Ollivander.

"I don't think so," said Lia. "Harry doesn't look anything like what I imagine the Boy-Who-Lived would look like now. I was friends with Lily, you know, and the baby Harry Potter looked exactly like the baby pictures of James Potter, except for the eyes, which were Lily's brilliant green. And also, the Boy-Who-Lived has a lightning-shaped scar on his forehead, and this Harry does not." Harry lifted up his bangs, revealing a forehead with no scar, thanks to a glamour charm.

"I suppose this isn't the Boy-Who-Lived then," sighed Mr. Ollivander. Lia nodded and paid for the three wands, seven galleons for each.

They then left and headed for Eyelops Owl Emporium, where the four kids picked out an eagle owl. Nick took charge of the owl and then they went to Magical Menagerie, where a cat was picked out. She was a white, with lovely gold and black spots, and Lia said that in some cultures, a three-colored cat was considered to be very lucky. The witch who ran the shop told them that this cat was part-kneazle, from one of it's great-grandfathers.



After, the five of them had lunch at the Leaky Cauldron, and then ice cream cones for dessert at Florean Fortescue's. Finally they went home, where Harry's birthday party was held. Harry got the shock of his life when he unwrapped the large present from Aunt Lia and saw lying amidst the red paper a magnificent Nimbus Two Thousand. "I can't believe it!" he gasped. "The new Nimbus! So that's why you refused to buy it for me at Diagon Alley! Aunt Lia, thank you!"

Valancy then handed Harry her present and when he removed the gold cloth covering the cage, he saw why Aunt Lia hadn't bought a second owl like he had asked. In the cage was a lovely snowy owl. Ariel handed Harry her gift, which was a book, a box of owl treats, and a water bowl and a food bowl.

In the evening, Harry decided to name his owl Hedwig, a name he had gotten from flipping through A History of Magic. Valancy and Nick named the eagle owl Edric, and Ariel named her cat Athena, after the Greek goddess of war, wisdom, and arts and crafts. Later they went to bed, having had an exciting day.

September 1st came and it was time to go to Hogwarts. Early in the morning, at six thirty, Kana the house elf woke the four kids up and they brushed their teeth and had breakfast. Then there was a quick check to make sure that everything was packed, and then at seven thirty everyone climbed into the car Lia had bought two years ago. The boot had been expanded magically to fit the trunks, but otherwise it was a normal car with no spells on it. The drive to London took around three hours and they arrived at King's Cross Station at ten forty-five.

Lia helped them get trolleys and led them to the barrier between Platforms Nine and Ten. "Just go through the wall you'll get into Platform Nine and Three-Quarters. Ariel, you're oldest, so you can go first."

Ariel pushed her trolley toward the barrier, and after a quick look around to make sure no Muggles were watching, entered the barrier. A minute later, Nick appeared behind her, then Harry. Finally Valancy and Aunt Lia appeared. "All right, dears," said Aunt Lia. "I'll help you get your trunks on the train." When the three trunks were loaded, she handed Harry, Ariel, and Nick each a packet with two turkey sandwiches and an apple. "Here. And mind that you eat it all, since I don't want you eating too much in the way of sweets on the train. And Ariel, make sure your brothers eat their sandwiches and apple."

"I will, Aunt Lia," said Ariel. Just then, a red-haired family walked by them and Lia turned and saw Molly Weasley, an old friend of her late sister, Bridget. "Molly!" she exclaimed.

Mrs. Weasley turned and saw Lia. "Joyce Stenson! I haven't seen you since Bridget's funeral! Goodness, what are you doing here?"

"Three of the four children I've adopted are starting Hogwarts this year," responded Lia. "I'm seeing them off. These are Harry, Nick, Ariel, and Valancy."

"My youngest son, Ron, is starting Hogwarts this year, too," said Mrs. Weasley, gesturing at a tall boy with freckles and gangly arms. "The twins Fred and George are in third year, and Percy is a fifth year and

a prefect. Bill and Charlie have graduated, and Ginny's not due to start Hogwarts until next year."

Valancy perked up and walked over to Ginny. "You have to wait a year, too?" she asked. "My sister and adopted brothers get to go to Hogwarts this year and I wish I could be with them."

Ginny nodded. "Yeah, I wish I could go to Hogwarts, too. Now it'll be just me at home with Mum, and Dad when he's not at work. It'll be lonely being all alone."

"I'll be alone too," said Valancy. "Aunt Lia is wonderful, but without my sister and brother to play with, it'll be boring. They've promised to write, but it won't be the same."

Aunt Lia interrupted them. "The Hogwart's Express is going to leave in a couple of minutes, so the two of you better go say good-bye to your siblings now."

Valancy hugged Ariel, Harry, and Nick and bid them good-bye. Her siblings promised to write and said that they'd see her during the Christmas holidays. Then they boarded the train and with the Weasley boys, leaned out the window to wave good-bye and be hugged and kissed by Aunt Lia and Mrs. Weasley. The train began moving a minute later and Mrs. Weasley called after them, "Fred! George! Behave yourselves!"

Valancy and Ginny ran after the train until it began moving too fast and then the two girls fell back, waving. Once the train was out of sight, they looked at each other. "Ginny, I think we ought to be friends," said Valancy. "I like you very much already, and we both will be the only kids at home now that our older siblings are at Hogwarts."

Ginny nodded. "I like you, too." They promised to write to each other, and Mrs. Weasley and Aunt Lia said it was fine for them to visit each other via Floo whenever it could be arranged. Because of the Fidelus Charm, Aunt Lia had to first give Mrs. Weasley and Ginny a slip of parchment with her address written on it. After they had read and memorized it, the parchment was burned and then they left. Valancy

and Lia also went home after having some lunch at the Leaky Cauldron.

Meanwhile, Harry, Nick, Ariel, Ron, and a girl named Hermione Granger had gotten a compartment together. Hermione had bushy brown hair, rather large front teeth, and was Muggleborn. She had read and memorized the contents of all her school texts like Ariel and Nick had done, and she loved to read as much as Ariel did, though she didn't read as much fiction books as Ariel did.

Ariel and Hermione got along rather well, while Harry and Nick soon became friends with Ron Weasley. Ron sounded gloomy as he talked about his older brothers and mentioned how with such a large family and not much money, he didn't get anything new. Ariel attempted to cheer him up by saying, "At the orphanage I lived in until Aunt Lia adopted me and Val, I didn't get anything new, either. My clothes were all the stuff the older kids had outgrown. And most of the toys and books were old, too."

Nick, who had a few memories of his old orphanage, said, "It wasn't much fun for me. The director was mean, and there weren't any toys at all. I don't remember much else, since I was only three and a half when Aunt Lia adopted me."

Hermione and Ron looked horrified. "No toys?" asked Ron. "That's terrible, Nick!"

Nick shrugged. "I told you, I don't remember much about the place. Just that it was gloomy and gray, and the director was really strict. I can't remember his name, but I was punished every time I did accidental magic. I think they involved being locked in a cupboard or being sat in a corner for an hour or being sent to bed without supper. Besides, Aunt Lia says the place is better now. After she adopted me, she donated money to the orphanage and checks up every year to make sure changes for the better are being made. She's threatened that if no changes are made, the donations stop, and the director doesn't want that. A playground has been added, toys have been brought, and a telly has been installed. Oh, and books for pleasure reading in the library have been added, not just boring textbooks. And

she pops by unannounced, so the director can't fix things to look nice ahead of time."

Hermione then looked questioningly at Harry, who said, "I was adopted by Aunt Lia when I was one, so I have no memories of any orphanage. Aunt Lia says it was nice, though, like the one Ariel and Val had to live at."

The witch with the food trolley came by them and they all bought some snacks, except Ron, who muttered that he had sandwiches. When the sandwiches turned out to be corned beef, which Ron didn't like, Harry handed him his packet of turkey sandwiches and they all offered to share their snacks. Ariel didn't comment on Harry giving up his sandwiches, but did give one her sandwiches to him to eat, saying sternly, "Aunt Lia wanted you to eat something healthy, and you shall."

As Hermione was unfamiliar with wizarding sweets, the others began explaining them to her. Then the conversation turned to Hogwarts. Ron had been told by his twin brothers that the Sorting hurt and involved wrestling a troll. When Harry heard, he laughed and said, "They're just joking. Aunt Lia wanted the Sorting to be a surprise for us, but did tell us that it didn't hurt, wasn't a test of any sort, and it just determined what house we would be best suited for. She said her older sister told her that it involved fighting a werewolf. If you attacked it with your bare hands, you were a Gryffindor, if you decided to look up ways to fight it, you were a Ravenclaw, if you fainted or attempted to fight it and worked hard at it, you were a Hufflepuff, and if you tried to trick it or get it on your side, you were a Slytherin."

Ron laughed at that. Hermione raised a brow. "Well, what sort of makes sense, I guess. If that really was the Sorting, I'd likely go into Ravenclaw, because I'd first look up ways to combat it. But I'd much rather be in Gryffindor, since I've read that it's the best house by far and that Dumbledore was in there."

"I think we all want to be in Gryffindor," said Ariel. "Though I wouldn't mind being in Ravenclaw. I do have the qualities of that house, so I could end up there. I don't want to be in Slytherin, though. If it weren't associated with Dark wizards, I wouldn't mind, but it is, so I don't want

to go there. I'm afraid that I might be sorted there, since I have tons of ambition and my wand shot out green sparks when I first touched it. Harry and Nick got red sparks, Gryffindor's color, but I got Slytherin's color."

"Well, if you got sorted in Slytherin, we wouldn't hate you," said Nick. He looked at the others. "Right?"

Harry, Ron, and Hermione nodded. "You're nice," said Harry. "And if you did end up in Slytherin, you could be the only really good one since Professor Slughorn. He was the Potions professor during Aunt Lia's time at school. He wasn't a evil, didn't care about pureblood supremacy, and had a 'Slug Club' for those students with famous relatives or had the potential to become great."

Some time later, a round-faced boy boy, looking almost tearful, came in. "Has anybody seen a toad? I've lost mine."

"I'm sorry, we haven't," said Ron.

"Trevor keeps getting away from me?" wailed the boy.

"I'll help," said Ariel, standing up. "I've learned the Summoning Spell. Accio Trevor!" A few second later, a toad came zooming towards her. She grabbed it handed it to the boy. "Here you are. I'm Ariel Kennedy. What's your name?"

"Neville Longbottom," replied the boy. "Thanks for helping me find my toad."

"You're welcome, Neville," smiled Ariel. She introduced the others in the compartment to him and then Neville left for his compartment.

Hermione looked at Ariel, awed. "You know the Summoning Charm? But we don't learn that until fourth or fifth year!"

"I and my siblings were found too often with Aunt Lia's wand, so Aunt Lia, decided she might as well teach us a few simple spells. And I got Kana, our house elf, to teach me some more difficult spells."

Hermione said, "Then you'll be good at magic, Ariel. I did a few simple spells at home for practice and they all worked for me. I haven't tried anything more difficult, though. And what's a house elf? I didn't read about them yet."

Ariel explained and soon the Hogwarts Express arrived at the station. Hagrid was calling, "First years! First years over here!" The first years gathered to him and they had to cross the lake to Hogwarts via boats. Four people were to a boat and Hermione, Ariel, Neville, and a girl who introduced herself as Susan Bones took one boat. Ron, Nick, Harry, and a boy who introduced himself as Seamus Finnigan took another boat. Hagrid, who was in the lead boat with a lantern, tapped his boat once everyone was in a boat and they set off across the lake. Soon they arrived at the other side and they went up the path to the castle, where Hagrid knocked loudly at the front door.

Professor McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress and Head of Gryffindor, met Hagrid and the first years. She was tall, with black hair done in a bun, dressed in emerald-green robes, and had square spectacles. Her face was very stern and of someone it was unwise to cross.

"The first-years, Professor McGonagall," said Hagrid.

"Thank you, Hagrid. I will take them from here."

She pulled the door wide. The Entrance Hall was so big you could have fitted the entire cottage in it if the cottage hadn't added any extra rooms. The stone walls were lit with flaming torches like the ones at Gringotts, the ceiling was too high to make out, and a magnificent marble staircase facing them led to the upper floors.

They followed Professor McGonagall across the flagged stone floor. The drone of hundreds of voices could be heard from a doorway to the right - the rest of the school must already be here - but Professor McGonagall showed the first-years into a small empty chamber off the hall. They crowded in, standing rather closer together than they would usually have done, peering about nervously.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," said Professor McGonagall. "The start-of-term-banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory and spend free time in your house common room.

"The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin. Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn you house points, while any rule-breaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the House Cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours.



"The Sorting ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting."

Her eyes lingered for a moment on Neville's cloak, which was fastened under his left ear, and on Ron's smudged nose. Ariel smoothed the front of her robes and Harry tried to make his hair lie flat. Nick nervously adjusted his glasses and repinned his cloak.

"I shall return when we are ready for you," said Professor McGonagall. "Please wait quietly." She left the chamber.

Hermione began fidgeting nervously and whispered, "What did your Aunt Lia tell you about the Sorting, Ariel?"

"Relax, Hermione," said Ariel, though she sounded nervous herself. "it's not going to hurt, and it's not a test of any sort. Something just judges what house we'd fit best in."

Then something happened which made Hermione and Ariel jump about a foot in the air - several people behind them screamed. "What the -?"

They gasped. So did the people around them. About twenty ghosts had just streamed through the back wall. Pearly-white and slightly transparent, they glided across the room talking to each other and hardly glancing at the first-years.

They seemed to be arguing.

What looked like a fat little monk was saying, "Forgive and forget, I say, we ought to give him a second chance-"

"My dear Friar, haven't we given Peeves all the chances he deserves? He gives us all a bad name and you know, he's not really even a ghost - I say, what are you all doing here?" A ghost wearing a ruff and tights had suddenly noticed the first-years. Nobody answered.

"New students!" said the Fat Friar, smiling around at them. "About to be sorted, I suppose?"

A few people nodded mutely.

"Hope to see you in Hufflepuff!" said the Friar. "My old house, you know."

"Move along now," said a sharp voice. "The Sorting Ceremony's about to start."

Professor McGonagall had returned. One by one, the ghosts floated away through the opposite wall.

"Now, form a line," Professor McGonagall told the first-years, "and follow me." They all nervously followed her into the Great Hall.

It was lit by thousands and thousands of candles which were floating in mid-air over four long tables, where the rest of the students were sitting. These tables were laid with glittering golden plates and goblets. At the top of the Hall was another long table where the teachers were sitting. Professor McGonagall led the first-years up here, so that they came to a halt in a line facing the other students, with the teachers behind them.

Nick looked upwards and saw a velvety black ceiling dotted with stars. He heard Hermione whisper, "It's bewitched to look like the sky outside, I read about it in *Hogwarts: A History*."

Nick whispered back, "I know, Hermione. I've read it too." Hermione looked delighted, but didn't reply, as Professor McGonagall was silently placing a four-legged stool in front of the first-years. On top of the stool she put a pointed wizard's hat. This hat was patched and frayed and extremely dirty.

For a few seconds, there was complete silence. Then the hat twitched. A rip near the brim opened wide like a mouth - and the hat began to sing. Once the song was over, everyone clapped, and Harry felt relieved that all they had to do was try on the Sorting Hat to be sorted. From the expressions on Ariel's and Nick's faces, they were relieved as well.

Professor McGonagall now stepped forward holding a long roll of parchment. "When I call your name, you will put on the hat and sit on the stool to be sorted," she said. "Abbott, Hannah!"

A pink-faced girl with blonde pigtails stumbled out of line, put on the hat, which fell right down over her eyes, and sat down. A moment's pause - "HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat.

The table on the right cheered and clapped as Hannah went to sit down at the Hufflepuff table. The ghost of the Fat Friar waved merrily at her.

"Bones, Susan!"

"HUFFLEPUFF!" shouted the hat again, and Susan scuttled off to sit next to Hannah.

"Boot, Terry!"

"RAVENCLAW!"

The table second from the left clapped this time; several Ravenclaws stood up to shake hands with Terry as he joined them. "Brocklehurst, Mandy" went to Ravenclaw too, but "Brown, Lavender" became the first new Gryffindor and the table on the far left exploded with cheers; Harry could see Ron's twin brothers catcalling. "Bulstrode, Millicent" then became the first Slytherin. Nick frowned and Harry thought the Slytherins looked like an unpleasant lot.

The sorting continued, with Justin Finch-Fletchley sorted into Hufflepuff and Seamus Finnigan in Gryffindor. (It took almost a minute with him.) Then it was Hermione's turn and she almost ran to the stool and jammed the hat eagerly on her head.

"GRYFFINDOR!" shouted the hat. Ariel smiled happily and waved to Hermione as she went to join the Gryffindor table.

A few more names were called, and then it "Kennedy, Ariel," was called. She nervously made her way up to the stool and placed the Sorting Hat on her head.

"Hmm," said a small voice in her year. "Where shall I place you? Your father was in Slytherin, but your mother in Ravenclaw." Ariel froze in shock. She knew nothing about her parents, other than the fact that her mother had one day shown up at St. Margerat's with her and Valancy and left them there, saying that she was unable to take care of them. She hadn't left a name and had only given the names of her children and their birthdate. Now it appeared that the Sorting Hat knew her parents were.

"How do you know?" thought Ariel at the Hat.

"I Sorted your parents, you know. And I can see into your mind and can figure out your heritage. You do have a memory of your mother and the man who fathered you and your sister, after all. Even if it is a bit dim for you."

Ariel gasped, since she did have a vague memory of a blond-haired man doing something with a red-haired woman. She didn't know what he was doing, but the woman in her memory seemed to be crying. Then she wondered if the man was a Death Eater, since he had been in Slytherin. She quickly dismissed such thoughts and silently asked, "Could you hurry up and Sort me, sir? Or it'll take longer than it did for that Seamus Finnigan."

The voice in her ear chuckled and said, "All right then. Where shall I place you? You have a love of books and are quite clever, just like your mother Fiona Kennedy was. You also have plenty of courage, perfect for Gryffindor, the house her father was in. But you also have a thirst to prove yourself and a great deal of ambition."

"Oh no, you're not going to put me in Slytherin!" snapped Ariel in her mind. "I want to be in Gryffindor!"

"But your talent would go to waste in Gryffindor," protested the Hat. "You have courage, true, but your thirst to prove yourself and ambition is much more. And with you in Slytherin, you can prove to others that not all Slytherins are bad."

"Look, everybody already has a prejudice against Slytherins. Only my sister and foster brothers, and prehaps Hermione and Ron, won't care if I'm in Slytherin and won't hate me or shun me. But everybody else will!"

"That does not matter," said the Hat. "You do not belong in Gryffindor or Ravenclaw. That is to say, you do not fit best in there. And while you are also loyal and hard-warking, you do not fit best in Hufflepuff either. You will go to - SLYTHERIN!"

The last word was shouted out to the entire hall. Ariel threw off the Hat and shouted, "I demand a re-Sorting!"

Professor McGonagall hurried over, surprised. "What is the matter, Miss Kennedy?"

"I don't want to be in Slytherin, Professor! That blasted Hat put me in Slytherin after I specifically told it that I didn't want to go there and preferred Gryffindor. I refuse to go to Slytherin! Have the stupid Hat resort me or something."

"Don't insult the hat, Miss Kennedy," reproved Professor McGonagall. "And I'm sorry, but you have to go to Slytherin. The Sorting Hat doesn't make a mistake and apparently saw something that made Slytherin the most suitable house for you."

"But I don't want to go there!" shouted Ariel. "The House has a reputation for producing Dark Witches and Wizards! Almost everybody in that house has a prejudice against Muggles and Muggleborns!"

"Well, then you can prove that not everyone in Slytherin is a Dark Wizard and has a prejudice against Muggleborns," said McGonagall. "Now please sit down at the Slytherin table and stop making a scene, or I shall take five points away."

"Take the points away!" snapped Ariel. "Slytherin can lose a million points for all I care! I don't want it to win the House Cup!"

Professor McGonagall frowned. "Ten points from Slytherin for your outburst, Miss Kennedy. Now go join the Slytherin table unless you wish to receive a detention." When Ariel didn't move, McGonagall snapped, "Do you want it to be a week's detention?"

Ariel sighed and reluctantly sat down at the end of the Slytherin table. Several of the other students glared at her, not having like her outburst. Students from the other houses were whispering amongst themselves, surprised that there actually was a student sorted into Slytherin that didn't want to be there.

The Sorting continued. Neville Longbottom, the boy who had lost his toad, tripped on his way to the stool and the Hat took a long time with him before finally declaring him a Gryffindor. He ran off still wearing it and had to run back amid gales of laughter to give it to Morag MacDougal. Ariel was not in the mood to laugh and glared at the other Slytherins. Daphne Greengrass, a fellow first year, gave her a sympathetic look. Ariel ignored it and turned her attention back to the Sorting.

Draco Malfoy, Theodore Nott, and Pansy Parkinson were sorted into Slytherin, Ernie Mcmillian in Hufflepuff, and Padma Patil in Ravenclaw and her twin Parvati in Gryffindor. Then Harry Stenson was called up. Harry placed the Hat on his head and gave a start of surprise when he heard a voice in his ear say, "Ah, so you're Harry Potter?" He instantly put up his shields, but the Hat just chuckled and said, "Occulemency doesn't work on me. Don't worry, I won't betray your secret. I never reveal what I see in the minds of the students I sort. Now, where should I put you?"

"You'd better not put me in Slytherin like you did with Ariel," snapped Harry in his mind. "Besides, why did you sort her there?"

"Because that was the house best suited for her," replied the Hat. "She had plenty of ambition and a thirst to prove herself, so that's why I placed her there. Now, where should I place you? You have a good mind, plenty of courage, and a thirst to prove yourself."

"Gryffindor will be fine," said Harry, having no intention of going into Slytherin, not even to keep his sister company.

"Gryffindor?" asked the Hat. "Are you sure? Slytherin's good, too. Well, if you're sure, then it had better be -GRYFFINDOR!" The Gryffindor table burst into loud applause as Harry took off the Hat and went to join the table. Ariel looked glum and wondered why her brother had been able to get into Gryffindor but she couldn't.

Next was Nicolas Stenson and Nick went to be Sorted. The Hat said, "Well, well, you have plenty of loyalty. And you're willing to work hard. You also have courage and a clever mind, but your loyalty and willingness to work hard is much more."

"Well, Hufflepuff is a good house," said Nick in his mind. "And it is much better than Slytherin. But why not place me there? Then I could keep Ariel company."

"You do not belong there," replied the Hat. "You have some ambition, but not enough to be in Slytherin, and you have practically no cunning at all."

"Neither does Ariel, but yet you still Sorted her into Slytherin," said Nick.

"Actually, your foster-sister does have some cunning," said the Hat. "Not a great deal, but enough for her to be in Slytherin. Now back to you. I think Hufflepuff is the house best suited for you."

"If you say so," said Nick. "Hufflepuff is a very good house, even though it might not be as good as Gryffindor."

"All right then," said the Hat. "You shall be Sorted into - HUFFLEPUFF!"

The Hufflepuff tables burst into applause as Nick took off the Hat and joined the table. Four students were left to be sorted after him. Dean Thomas, a black boy taller than Ron, was sorted into Gryffindor, and then Lisa Turpin went to Ravenclaw. Ron was next and he was sorted into Gryffindor. Harry heard Percy Weasley say pompously, "Well done, Ron, excellent," as Blaise Zabini was sorted into Slytherin.

Dumbledore stood up then and welcomed everyone and with the words, "Nitwit! Blubber! Oddment! Tweak!" the feast began. Ariel filled her plate with food and began to eat. After a few minutes, Pansy looked over at her. "So, you think you're too good to be in Slytherin?" she asked nastily. "You're probably not even a pureblood."

"My parents were witch and wizard," snapped Ariel. "My mother was in Ravenclaw and my father in Slytherin."

The others looked surprised. Malfoy edged away from the Bloody Baron, the Slytherin ghost, and said, "You were that girl I met in Diagon Alley."

"Yes," snapped Ariel, looking annoyed.

"If your father was in Slytherin, then why didn't you want to be sorted here?" asked Daphne.

"Because I don't know him. He died or disappeared when I was a toddler and I got sent to an orphanage. My sister and I got adopted when I was almost four by a witch, my Aunt Lia. She was in Gryffindor."

"So she taught you to hate Slytherin," said Theodore Nott, frowning.

"Not exactly," snapped Ariel. "I don't have anything against ambition. I do have a problem with Dark witches and wizards and a prejudice against Muggles and Muggleborns, however! I wouldn't mind being in Slytherin if it didn't have such a reputation."

Daphne looked thoughtful and glanced at Pansy, Millicent, and Tracey Davis, the other Slytherin first year girls. She then looked at Ariel and shrugged.

Over at the Gryffindor table, Harry was introduced to the Gryffindor ghost, Sir Nicolas de Mimsy-Porpington, or Nearly-Headless Nick as he was more commonly known. Nick was chatting with Ernie, Justin, Hannah, and Susan over at the Hufflepuff table and had been introduced to the Fat Friar, the Hufflepuff ghost. Harry and Nick were getting along with their housemates and were pleased being where



they were, though a part of them was feeling sorry for Ariel being in Slytherin.

When everyone had eaten as much as they could, the remains of the food faded from the plates, leaving them sparkling clean as before. A moment later the puddings appeared. Blocks of ice-cream in every flavor you could think of, apple pies, treacle tarts, chocolate éclairs and jam doughnuts, trifle, strawberries, jelly, rice pudding... Ariel filled her plate with ice cream and a teacle tart and began half-heartedly eating it. She was now ignoring her housemates and had taken out Jane Eyre to read as she ate.

At last, the puddings too disappeared and Professor Dumbledore got to his feet again. The Hall fell silent.

"Ahem - just a few more words now we are all fed and watered. I have a few start-of-term notices to give you. First-years should note that the forest in the grounds is forbidden to all pupils. And a few of our older students would do well to remember that as well." Dumbledore's twinkling eyes flashed in the direction of the Weasley twins.

"I have also been asked my Mr. Filch, the caretaker, to remind you all that no magic should be used in the corridors. Quidditch trials will be held in the second week of term. Anyone interested in playing for their house teams should contact Madam Hooch. And finally, I must tell you that this year, the third-floor corridor on the right-hand side is out of bounds to anyone who does not wish to die a most painful death."

Ariel blinked in surprise at this announcement.

"And now before we go to bed, let us sing the school song!" cried Dumbledore. Harry and Nick noticed that the other teachers' smiles had become rather fixed.

Dumbledore gave his wand a little flick as if he were trying to get a fly off the end and a long golden ribbon flew out of it, which rose high above the tables and twisted itself snake-like into words.

"Everyone pick their favorite tune," said Dumbledore, "and off we go!" The entire school began bellowing the school song.

Everybody finished the song at different times. At last, only the Weasley twins were left singing along to a very slow funeral march. Dumbledore conducted their last few lines with his wand, and when they had finished, he was one of those who clapped

"Ah, music," he said, wiping his eyes. "A magic beyond all we do here! And now, bedtime. Off you trot!"

Ariel packed her book away and reluctantly got up. She joined the other Slytherin first years and followed the prefect down to the Slytherin common room in the dungeons area. The prefect paused by a stretch of bare, damp stone wall. "The password is Slytherins rule." Ariel grimaced as a door hidden in the wall opened,. She followed the other Slytherins inside and up to the first year girls' dorm.

The five beds in the room all had green hangings. Ariel, in a fit of pique, transfigured the hangings on her bed to red, and then changed into her nightgown and got into bed to read. The other girls came in and Pansy asked nastily, "Do you have a death wish, Kennedy?"

"Ariel, you shouldn't have transfigured the color of your bed curtains," said Daphne.

Ariel looked up from Jane Eyre. "Oh, you don't like red? Too bad. I do. I'm not changing them back to green, and don't bother trying to threaten to hex me to get me to change them back. I know how to defend myself magically. And if you change them back to green, I'll just transfigure them red again." She then returned to her book.

Pansy and Millicent looked very angry. Tracey was angry also, but not as much as those too. Daphne shrugged and quickly distracted the three other girls.

Meanwhile, Nick had gone up to his dorm room and was talking with the other Hufflepuff boys. He was already on his way toward becoming friends with Ernie and Justin, though of course he would still be closest to Harry, Ariel, and Valancy.

Harry was in the Gryffindor dorm and getting to know the other boys in his year. Ron was already a very good friend, and Harry thought that Neville would make a good friend too, despite his tendency to forget or lose things and being clumsy. Harry sensed that Neville had inner bravery and would, with some confidence, do well, and decided to help him bring it his inner strength and abilities.

The next morning, Ariel woke up at five thirty. She showered, brushed her teeth, and got dressed, then took out parchment, quill, and ink to write a letter to Aunt Lia. Daphne woke up at six twenty and crept over to Ariel's bed. "Erm, can I talk with you?"

Ariel looked up from her book. "I guess. As long as you're not going to be rude like that Pansy Parkinson.

"I was thinking about what you said last night, Ariel," said Daphne. "You know, the reputation Slytherin house has, which is why you didn't want to be sorted here. I never thought Slytherin was all that bad."

"Well, I never really thought it bad," responded Ariel. "Aunt Lia explained that ambition isn't bad unless you let it rule you, and a small dose of cunning doesn't hurt. And she said that the Potions teacher before the current one was a pretty decent Slytherin. He didn't have anything against Muggleborns and liked to focus on the students who had great potential or influential relatives. The only problem I have with Slytherin is it's reputation of producing Dark witches and wizards and having a prejudice with Muggles."

Daphne nodded thoughtfully. "You have a point. The reputation Slytherins have doesn't endear us to the rest of the school. But what can we do? We might not be the stereotypical Slytherin, but almost all the other Slytherins are. But I don't quite understand why the Sorting Hat placed you in Slytherin. It first wanted to place me in Hufflepuff, but I told it no, since my parents would likely disown me if I got into any house other than Slytherin. And maybe Ravenclaw. It's for all the clever people, so my parents wouldn't mind too much if I got sorted there. But they would much rather I was in Slytherin."

"Well, my Aunt Lia would much rather have me be in Gryffindor," said Ariel. "Or at least any house other than Slytherin. But she's not going to mind very much at my being in Slytherin. She knows I'm not evil. But I really don't like the fact I got sorted here. If Slytherin just didn't have a terrible reputation."

Daphne shrugged. "Well, the two of us can't change it. We could prove that not everyone in Slytherin is evil, but the rest of the school

would still know that most of the Slytherins are evil. And I can't act too much like a non-Slytherin, or my parents will be annoyed and punish me severely. Or perhaps disown me. And then I'll have no place to go."

Ariel was instantly sympathetic to the other girl. "I think I like you, Daphne. Do you want to be friends?"

Daphne smiled. "Oh, that would be wonderful!" Then she frowned. "But the other girls wouldn't like it if I were friends with you. And if my parents found out, they wouldn't be happy, either. They'd rather I were friends with Pansy and the like."

"Why should you care about what the other girls think, Daphne?" asked Ariel. "I don't."

"Erm, how about if I be your friend in secret?" asked Daphne. "I have to spend some time with Pansy and Millicent to keep them and my parents happy. I can pretend to be their friend, but in reality just be your friend."

"That works," said Ariel, shrugging. "I'll probably be spending much of my time with my foster brothers, anyway." She then told Daphne about Harry and Nick, and then about her sister Valancy and Aunt Lia. When she was done, the three other girls woke up and Daphne fled to the bathroom to shower and brush her teeth.

Pansy looked nastily at Ariel and then at the red bed hangings. "Get rid of them," she snapped. "I don't like you being here, Ariel Kennedy. You think you're too good for Slytherin and-"

"Oh shut up!" retorted Ariel. "Oh, did you know that your face looks like a pug? Millie looks prettier than you, even if she is rather big and built along the lines of those two goons that seem to follow Malfoy around."

Millicent blinked and asked, "Are you talking about me?"

"Yeah," said Ariel. "I've decided that your first name is too long and shortened to Millie."

Meanwhile, Pansy was very angry at Ariel insulting her, and suddenly shrieked, "How dare you insult me, Flamehead!"

Ariel just smiled. "You know, I've been called Flamehair and Carrottop and a few other names by my sister and brothers when we were angry at each other. So your name really isn't original, and doesn't hurt me."

"Then I'll call you-um-Mudblood!" snapped Pansy.

"Well, I'm not one," said Ariel calmly. "My parents were witch and wizard, and my father was in Slytherin. Which means he was a pureblood, and my mother must have been one as well, otherwise he wouldn't have been with her."

Tracey pulled at Pansy's sleeve. "You're not going to get anywhere with her, Pansy. Just give it up."

Pansy glared at Ariel, then turned and went to the bathroom to brush her teeth. Tracey and Millicent followed her.

Meanwhile, Nick had also risen early to write to Aunt Lia. When he had finished the letter, the other Hufflepuff boys woke up and he had a few minutes conversation with Justin and Ernie. Justin was Muggleborn and was surprised and pleased that Nick knew about both the magical and Muggle worlds.

Harry woke up at the same time Neville and Dean did. He woke up Ron and helped Dean wake up Seamus. After getting dressed and taking care of the rest of his morning business, Harry went down to the Great Hall for breakfast. Hermione was already at the Gryffindor table, eating oatmeal and reading one of her course books. She looked up when Harry sat down and said, "Good morning, Harry. How are you?"

"Morning, Hermione," responded Harry. "I'm fine, but still a bit sleepy. I'll be fully awake once I had some breakfast." He poured himself a glass of juice and then filled his plate with some eggs and bacon. Ron and Neville joined him then.

Harry ate a few bites, then took out parchment, quill, and ink to write a letter to Valancy and Aunt Lia. Ariel strode into the Great Hall, Daphne by her side. Daphne headed for the Slytherin table, but Ariel went to the Gryffindor table.

Percy frowned at Ariel. "You don't belong here, Miss Kennedy," he said. "You're supposed to be at the Slytherin table."

"There's no rule that says students have to sit at their house table," replied Ariel. "In fact, the mixing of students was encouraged in the past, according to Hogwarts, a History. The Founders especially thought it a good idea."

Percy could not come up with any further objection, so turned his attention back to his breakfast. Hermione smiled at Ariel. "It's a pity that we're not in the same house, Ariel. I was really surprised at your outburst."

"Well, I wasn't too happy at being sorted into Slytherin," answered Ariel. "Though I suppose I shouldn't have spoken like that to Professor McGonagall. I probably didn't give her a very good impression of myself."

Harry looked sympathetically at his foster sister. "How is it in Slytherin? I'm starting to regret asking the Hat to put me in Gryffindor. It said that Slytherin was good for me, also. Perhaps I should have let it sort me into Slytherin so I could be with you and keep you company."

"Oh, it's all right," said Ariel. "Aunt Lia would probably have cats if you got sorted into Slytherin. And what would your father think? Aunt Lia said that he hated Slytherin. He'd turn over in his grave if you got sorted there."

"I suppose," said Harry. "But I think he and my mother would have accepted it and wished me well."

Ron asked, "Are you all right in Slytherin, Ariel? That outburst of yours last night worried me."

"It's not as bad as I thought," responded Ariel. "Daphne Greengrass is a nice girl and wants to be friend with me, because she has to be careful. Her parents wouldn't like her being seen with me and would much rather have her be friends with girls like that Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode. Pansy doesn't like me at all, especially when I transfigured the green hangings on my bed to red. Millicent was pretty mad about it, too. Tracey Davis wasn't as mad as Millie or Pansy, but she was certainly annoyed."

Hermione looked sympathetic. "Well, we're sticking by you, Ariel. We don't care if you're in Slytherin."

"Thanks," said Ariel. Then she drained her goblet of juice and got up. "Well, I'll let you finish your letter, Harry. I'm going over to the Hufflepuff table to speak with Nick and eat something."

The Hufflepuffs welcomed Ariel, though a boy named Zacharias Smith was a bit hesitant about her sitting there until she pointed out that it wasn't against the rules and had been encouraged in the past. Justin was very curious about Ariel not wanting to be in Slytherin and she and Nick had to explain the bad reputation Slytherins had. Ernie said rather pompously, "Well, it doesn't matter if you're in Slytherin, Ariel. You're Nick's adopted sister and quite nice, and we'll stand with you."

"Thank you," said Ariel. She could tell that Ernie was being sincere, despite his pompousness.

Susan Bones and Hannah Abbott then got Ariel's attention and struck up a conversation with her. She found the two girls quite nice and was happy to become friends with them. Halfway through breakfast, the mail arrived. Sapphire, Aunt Lia's owl, flew over to the Hufflepuff table. She blinked upon only seeing Nick and Ariel there. After a questioning hoot, Nick said, "We got sorted into different houses, Sapphire. Harry's over at the Gryffindor table."

Sapphire dropped two letters on the table, dipped her beak in Nick's goblet, then flew over to the Gryffindor table. Harry untied the letter



attached to her leg and opened it. All three letters were from Valancy, and said the same thing.

"Dear Ariel/Harry/Nick,

When Aunt Lia and I got home this afternoon, I found it boring without you guys. So Aunt Lia said I could spend the rest of the afternoon with Ginny Weasley. I Flooed over to the Burrow, the Weasley home, and played for two hours with Ginny. She's a very good flyer and her Chaser skills are as good as me. Well, I think she's as good as me. The broom she was using wasn't all that good. I let her ride my Comet Two Sixty for awhile and she did much better. I think we're becoming good friends.

Mrs. Weasley had me stay for dinner and she was a fantastic cook. Please don't tell Aunt Lia or Kana I said, though. I don't want them thinking I'm insulting their cooking. Though Aunt Lia really isn't that great a cook at all. The only thing she's great at making is dessert. Anyway, I met Mr. Weasley and he's wild about Muggles and Muggle appliances. I had to mention the appliances at home and Mr. Weasley began pestering me during dinner with questions about plugs and tellys and how to use a phone and what rubber ducks were used for. Finally Mrs. Weasley put a stop to it and I had a nice conversation with Ginny.

When I returned home at seven thirty. Aunt Lia said I could watch the telly until eleven. That surprised me. However, there was nothing on that I wanted to watch, and I didn't feel like reading. It's so quiet without you guys, so I decided that I might as well write to you. I hope you're all in Gryffindor, though if you're in another house, it's all right. Aunt Lia and Kana say hello and wish you well. Oh, and if you know Ron, tell him that Ginny says hello. And do the same with Fred, George, and Percy. Please write soon and elevate my boredom some. I love you and miss you. Your sister, Val."

Harry looked up at the conclusion of his letter and said to Ron, "Ginny says hello, Ron. Apparently Val spent a few hours with your sister yesterday. She and Ginny seem to be on their way to becoming friends."

Ron nodded. "That's good. She's the only girl in our family, and the youngest, so she doesn't have anyone to play with except me and my brothers. And we don't always like having a girl play with us. Ginny could use a friend, and not just that girl who lives near us. I can't remember her name, but she's weird. Her father edits some magazine and she believes all the rubbish printed in it."

"What's the name of the magazine?" asked Harry.

"I think it's called The Quibble or The Quill or something like that," said Ron, shrugging.

"The Quibbler?" asked Harry. "Aunt Lia subscribes to it. The editor is, well, I know his last name is Lovegood. I've read it a couple of times and I suppose some of the articles are a bit weird. Aunt Lia gets it because she finds it amusing, and says some of the stuff printed in it might have a kernel of truth. At least, there's no evidence against most of the stuff in it."

Ron raised a brow, but didn't comment. Harry sought out Fred, George, and Percy and told them that Ginny said hello. He then finished writing his two letters just as Hedwig flew in. "Morning, girl," he said, stroking Hedwig's feathers. She nipped Harry's finger affectionately and then took a few nibbles of his toast and bacon. Harry tied the two letters to her leg and said, "When you're done eating, please take the letters to Aunt Lia and Val, all right, Hedwig?" Hedwig hooted assent and after drinking some of Harry's milk, flew off to deliver the letters.

After breakfast Harry had Transfiguration. Professor McGonagall gave the class a strict talking to, warning the class that anyone who misbehaved would leave her class and not return. Then everyone had to take some rather complicated notes before they were each given a match and turned to transfigure it into a needle. At the end of class, only Harry and Hermione had been able to succeed and Professor McGonagall gave them a rare smile and awarded five points to Gryffindor.

Slytherin and Hufflepuff had History of Magic together. The teacher was Professor Binns, a ghost. He had been very old when he had

fallen asleep by the staff fire. The next morning, he had gotten up as usual to teach, leaving his body behind. He was quite boring, droning on and on in a monotone voice about people in history. Ariel and Nick gave up paying attention to Professor Binns after the first few minutes and instead perused the first chapter of A History of Magic, taking copious notes as they read.

After Gryffindor had Herbology with the Hufflepuffs and Slytherin had Charms. Harry sought out Nick during Herbology and they along with Neville and Ron worked together potting plants. Neville turned out to be quite good at Herbology, knowing a great deal of magical plants. Professor Sprout looked impressed and awarded him five points for being able to answer a few questions. Nick, Harry, and Hermione were also able to answer a few questions correctly as well, and they were also awarded points.

In Charms, Professor Flitwick, the head of Ravenclaw, took roll call. He was a tiny old man, having to stand on a stack of books to be able to see over his desk. After roll call, he began explaining Charms and asked a few questions,. Ariel was able to answer them all. After the first question, Professor Flitwick said, "Very good, Miss Kennedy. Take a point-"

"No," interrupted Ariel. "Don't bother awarding any points to Slytherin on my account, Professor Flitwick. I'm not interested in helping Slytherin win the house cup another year in a row. If you want to award points to another Slytherin student, you may, but please don't award any points to me, Professor."

Pansy, Millicent, Tracey, Malfoy, Blaise, and Theodore all glared angrily at her. Crabbe and Goyle, not being at all smart, didn't realize what Ariel was saying, but when they saw Malfoy glaring at her, followed suit. Daphne was the only Slytherin that wasn't mad at her, and shot her an amused look. Ariel grinned and winked at her, then looked at Professor Flitwick.

He blinked several times, then said, "This is unexpected. Well, if you don't want me awarding you points, Miss Kennedy, then I won't." The rest of the Slytherins, except Daphne, looked even more angry. Professor Flitwick continued teaching.

After Charms, the other Slytherins gathered around Ariel. "What are you doing, Kennedy?" demanded Malfoy. Behind him, Crabbe and Goyle cracked their knuckles threateningly.

"What am I doing?" asked Ariel, feigning puzzlement.

"Answering questions and refusing to be awarded points for them!" snapped Pansy. "You got sorted into Slytherin, but you're not showing any house loyalty at all, Ariel Kennedy!"

"Leave her alone, Pansy," said Daphne, coming to stand next to Ariel. "She didn't want to be sorted in Slytherin, so you can't expect her to suddenly show house loyalty and be willing to have points awarded to Slytherin on her account."

Tracey suddenly looked thoughtful. "Daphne has a point, Pansy." Then her thoughtful look disappeared and she glared at Ariel. "But that doesn't mean we appreciate what you did in Charms! You had to opportunity to win SLytherin at least five points, and you passed it up!"

Theodore Nott looked very angry. "The Sorting Hat was crazy to sort you will us. You'll never make a good Slytherin, what with your refusing to be awarded points and sitting with the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs."

"Her adopted brothers are in Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, so why can't she sit at those tables?" asked Daphne.

"And there is no rule against it," pointed out Ariel. "In fact, such a thing was encouraged in the past."

Millicent took one step forward. She was quite big, built along the lines of Crabbe and Goyle, and now looked a bit menacing. Ariel wasn't afraid of her, however, and took out her wand.

"What are you going to do, hex us?" asked Blaise, frowning at the wand.

Ariel turned to look at the boy. "If you guys provoke me further, I might."

Malfoy took a step forward, drawing out his wand. "We don't like you, Kennedy! You might not be a mudblood, but you don't fit in Slytherin. In Diagon Alley, you basically said that you were a Muggle and Mudblood-lover."

Ariel had enough. She drew out a Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Bean from her pocket, aimed her wand, and said, "Waddiwasi!" The bean shot out from her hand and lodged in Malfoy's nose. He yelped, then tried to dislodge the bean. Crabbe and Goyle looked uncertain, while Pansy tried to help Malfoy. Tracey, Blaise, and Theodore were distracted with Malfoy's predicament, and Ariel quickly slipped away, Daphne following her.

When they had turned a corner, Daphne began giggling. "That was wonderful, Ariel. Serves Draco right. He's the most annoying boy I've ever met. My parents are acquaintances with his parents, so I've had the bad luck to spend some time with him before Hogwarts. I really wanted to stand up for you properly, Ariel, but didn't dare. The best I could do was point out some things."

"It's all right, Daphne," replied Ariel, grinning. "That spell I did on Malfoy was one I tried on Harry, after I got my wand. I lodged an Every Flavor Bean in his nose, getting him back for all the times he stole my diary to read."

"I'd have liked to see that," said Daphne. "Let's go down to lunch." Ariel sat at the Slytherin table during lunch, next to Daphne. The other Slytherin first years whispered to the older Slytherins, who then turned to glare angrily at Ariel. Several also made nasty comments, but as the staff table was full of teachers, couldn't do anything else.

After lunch was Transfiguration. Ariel and Daphne were the only ones to transfigure their matches into needles, while Malfoy managed to make his match silvery. Professor McGonagall awarded Daphne five points. She tried to award Ariel points, but Ariel wouldn't let her. "I don't want to win Slytherin any points and help them win the house cup, Professor McGonagall."

McGonagall blinked in surprise. Her lips twitched as she said, "All right then, Miss Kennedy, if you're sure." Apparently she did want Slytherin's winning streak to end, and appreciated an excuse to not award Slytherin points.

In the meantime, the Gryffindors had History of Magic, while the Hufflepuffs had Charms. Ron almost fell asleep having to listen to Professor Binns, but Harry nudged him awake and whispered, "You can just do what I'm doing, read the textbook and take notes." Ron nodded and did as Harry suggested. Neville followed suit a minute later. Hermione was the only one that was paying attention to Professor Binns with any interest.

When classes ended, Ariel and Daphne went outside and sat under a tree near the lake, working on their Transfiguration homework and talking. After awhile, Hermione joined them. Daphne asked, "Are you a pureblood?"

"No, I'm Muggleborn," answered Hermione, taking out A Beginner's Guide to Transfiguration.

Daphne frowned, and opened her mouth to speak, but Ariel shot her a look. Daphne shut her mouth and turned her attention back to her homework. She spoke occasionally to Ariel, but didn't speak at all to Hermione. On their way inside for dinner, Ariel hissed, "Daphne Greengrass, you'd better get over any problems you have with Hermione, or I'm not going to be your friend any longer."

Daphne looked shocked. "Don't, Ariel! It's just that I've been brought up thinking Mud-er, Muggleborns, are beneath purebloods. You can't expect me to get over such things so quickly. Give me some time to get used to Hermione Granger."

Ariel nodded. "Okay. But you had better learn that Muggleborns are just as good witches and wizards as purebloods, Daphne."

After dinner, Harry, Ron, and Neville met with Nick, Ernie, and Justin in the library. They worked on homework together and got to know each other better.

Author's Note: From now on, this fic is told from the point of view of Harry, Nick, and Ariel, but Ariel will probably get more space because writing about the point of view of a girl is easier for me, since I'm a girl. And also, she's in Slytherin, when she doesn't want to be, and will have things to deal with that I feel need to be written about. Later on, when I get to year two, Valancy's viewpoint will be added.

The week progressed. Defense Against Dark Arts was a subject many people had been looking forward to, but Professor Quirrell's lessons turned out to be a bit of a joke. His classroom smelled strongly of garlic, which everyone said was to ward off a vampire he'd met in Romania and was afraid would be coming back to get him one of these days.

His turban he was wearing, he told them, had been given to him by an African prince as a thank-you for getting rid of a troublesome zombie, but they weren't sure they believed this story. In Harry's class, when Seamus Finnigan asked eagerly how the zombie had been gotten rid of, Quirrell had turned pink and began talking about the weather. In Nick's class, Justin had asked the same thing and Quirrell had muttered something about chopping, then began discussing the first chapter of their Defense book. Ariel had asked in her class, and he had turned pink and began talking about vampires. Everyone noticed a funny odor hung about the turban, and Harry later reported that the Weasley twins insisted that it was stuffed full of garlic as well, so that Quirrell was protected wherever he went.

The second morning, Harry, Ariel, and Nick recieved letters from Aunt Lia. She congratulated Harry and Nick for getting into Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, and consoled Ariel for being in Slytherin. She told Ariel that Slytherin might not turn out to be so bad, ambition wasn't a bad thing, and to continue being friends with Daphne and see if she couldn't get some of the other Slytherins to change their views. Valancy had also written on Thursday, expressing her surprise at the three of them being sorted into different houses, and wondering if that would mean she would be in Ravenclaw next year. She also wrote that she was now good friends with Ginny, and had been introduced to Luna Lovegood, a girl her age who lived near the Weasleys. She commented that Luna appeared odd, but definitely had an unique

way of looking at things, and seemed to have, for lack of a better term, a 'gift' of saying uncomfortable truths.

On Friday was Potions class with the Gryffindors and Slytherins. Harry and Ariel couldn't understand why the houses had to be together, for it would just cause problems. Having Professor Snape, who favored his house, Slytherin, didn't help matters either. Ariel wished that Professor Slughorn, who had taught Potions in Aunt Lia's time, hadn't retired. He hadn't favored Slytherin, and all he had really cared about were those that were well-connected or smart and had to potential to make something of themselves.

When class began, Snape took roll call and paused for a second when he reached Harry's name. His glance flickered nastily at Harry. Ariel and Harry then remembered what Aunt Lia had told them about Snape. Apparently Snape had gone to school with Aunt Lia, as well with James and Lily Potter. According to Aunt Lia, she had not gotten along very well with Snape. She had never bullied him the way James and his friend Sirius Black did, but she had gotten into several shouting matches with him over calling Lily a 'Mudblood' and for being a generally unpleasant person. At least Snape had no idea who Harry really was, or he might bully Harry just for being James' son.

When roll call ended, Snape looked up at the class. "You are here to learn the subtle science, and exact art of potion-making," he began. He spoke in barely more than a whisper, but they caught every word - like Professor McGonagall, Snape had the gift of keeping a class silent without effort.

"As there is little foolish wand-waving here, many of you will hardly believe this is magic. I don't expect you will really understand the beauty of the softly simmering cauldron with its shimmering fumes, the delicate power of liquids that creep through human veins, bewitching the mind, ensnaring the senses... I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, even stopper death - if you aren't as big a bunch of dunderheads as I usually have to teach."

Ariel and Daphne exchanged looks, and Hermione seemed eager to prove she wasn't a dunderhead. Snape suddenly said, "Now, who



can tell me what I get if I added powdered root of asphodel to an infusion of wormwood?"

Ariel and Hermione raised their hands. Snape didn't even look at Hermione and nodded for Ariel to answer. "Asphodel and wormwood would make a very powerful potion known as the Draught of Living Death, sir."

Hermione lowered her hand and looked slightly disappointed. "Very good, Miss Kennedy," said Snape curtly. "A point to-"

"I don't want you to award me any points, sir," said Ariel, gazing unflinchingly at Snape. "You can award them to the other students."

Snape's black eyes flashed and his hooked nose looked a bit menacing as he snapped, "I will award points to whomever I like, Miss Kennedy. I think I will make that five points to Slytherin. Now, where would you look if you were told to find a bezoar?"

Harry and Hermione raised their hands. Ariel could have raised her hand as well, knowing the answer, but she didn't want to give Snape an excuse to award Slytherin points. Snape turned to look at her and snapped, "Miss Kennedy, I want you to answer!"

Ariel sighed, then said reluctantly, "You would find a bezoar in the stomach of goat, Professor."

"And its purpose, Miss Kennedy?" continued Snape.

"It will save you from most potions, sir." Hermione and Harry lowered their hands, Hermione looking disappointed.

"Very good, Miss Kennedy," said Snape. His eyes glittered maliciously as he said, "I think for answering my question correctly, I'll award five, no make that ten, points to Slytherin. Now, who can tell me the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?"

Harry and Hermione raised their hands again, but once again, Snape ignored them. Daphne and Malfoy raised their hands as well, but he

ignored them, too. "Miss Kennedy, I want you to answer this question."

Ariel had enough and said politely, but in an icy tone of voice, "I refuse to answer the question, Professor Snape. I have already answered three questions already and I think it would be fair for the other students to have a chance to answer. Harry and Hermione seem to know the answer and have their hands raised. Why don't you have them answer, sir?"

Snape briefly glanced at them, then turned back to Ariel. "I want you to answer, Miss Kennedy! So do it!"

"I'm sorry, but I don't think it's fair," replied Ariel. "Professor, why don't you have Daphne answer the question?"

Snape glared at her, then sighed and turned to Daphne. "Miss Greengrass, you may answer this question."

"There is no difference, sir," responded Daphne. "They are the same plant, also known as aconite."

"Correct," said Snape curtly. "Five points to Slytherin. And Miss Kennedy, you will serve a detention for your cheek."

Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Daphne gave her sympathetic looks. Ron glared at Snape, but had the sense to not push the issue, as Snape could get nasty. The class was then ordered to copy the answers to the questions down, then put into pairs and set to mixing a simple potion to cure boils. Snape swept around in his long black cloak, watching them weigh dried nettles and crush snake fangs, criticizing almost everyone, except Malfoy, whom he seemed to like.

Ariel, who would have selected Harry or Hermione to be her partner if given the choice, had been paired up with Daphne. She had muttered loud enough for Pansy and Millicent to hear that she didn't want to be paired up with the non-loyal Slytherin and Ariel had feigned a grumpy look. When work on the potion began, Daphne whispered, "Sorry about the comments I made, Ariel."

"It's all right, Daphne," answered Ariel. "I know you have to make it look like you aren't siding with me."

Snape was just telling everyone to look at the perfect way Malfoy had stewed his horned slugs when clouds of acid green smoke and a loud hissing filled the dungeon. Neville had somehow managed to melt Seamus's cauldron into a twisted blob and their potion was seeping across the stone floor, burning holes in people's seconds, the whole class was standing on their stools while Neville, who had been drenched in the potion when the cauldron collapsed, moaned in pain as angry red boils sprang up all over his arms and legs.

"Idiot boy!" snarled Snape, clearing the spilled potion away with one wave of his wand. "I suppose you added the porcupine quills before taking the cauldron off the fire?"

Neville whimpered as boils started to pop up all over his nose.

"Take him up to the hospital wing," Snape spat at Seamus. Then he rounded on Harry and Ron, who had been working next to Neville. "You - Stenson - why didn't you tell him not to add the quills? Thought he'd make you look good if he got it wrong, did you? That's a point you've lost for Gryffindor."

Ariel jumped to her feet, narrowly missing knocking over her cauldron. "That's not fair, sir! Harry was busy working on his potion and you ordered us not to talk except with our partners!"

Snape whirled on her. "Miss Kennedy, do not presume to tell me how to run a class or discipline my pupils."

"But Professor, you were-" began Ariel.

"Silence!" interrupted Snape. "If you do not hold your tongue, Miss Kennedy, you will receive another detention."

Ariel reluctantly sat down, but she glowered at Snape. Daphne glanced around to make sure nobody was watching, then gently touched Ariel's sleeve and whispered, "I know Snape is being unfair, but there's nothing you can do, Ariel. Just ignore him."

Harry and Ron were glaring at Snape, and Hermione looked shocked over the unfairness. She shot a sympathetic look at Ariel, who nodded in reply. When class ended, Snape kept Ariel back and informed her that for detention, she had to scrub out cauldrons. She was to report at the Potions classroom at six.

After, the students had the afternoon free, so Harry, Ron, Hermione and Ariel decided to go visit Hagrid. They were joined by Neville, who had been quickly healed of the boils up by Madam Pomfrey, who was in charge of the Hospital Wing. Aunt Lia had told Harry, Nick, and Ariel all about Hagrid, and they were interested to meet him. Daphne wanted to go with them, but Pansy had asked her to join her, and Daphne didn't dare beg off, so she couldn't go to meet Hagrid.

When they knocked, they heard a frantic scrambling from inside and several booming barks. Then Hagrid's voice rang out, saying, "Back, Fang - Back." Hagrid's big hairy face appeared in the crack as he pulled the door open. "Hang on," he said. "Back, Fang."

He let them in, struggling to keep a hold on the collar of an enormous black boarhound.

There was only one room inside. Hams and pheasants were hanging from the ceiling, a copper kettle was boiling on the open fire and in the corner stood a massive bed with a patchwork quilt over it.

"Make yerselves at home," said Hagrid letting go of Fang, who bounded straight at Ron and started licking his ears. Ariel and Harry stifled laughter.

A few minutes after their arrival, Nick turned up with Susan Bones and Justin Finch-Fletchly. They had apparently wanted to meet Hagrid as well. Hagrid was very pleased to have the company and bustled around, making tea and setting out rock cakes. Aunt Lia had warned about Hagrid's cooking, so they pretended to enjoy the cakes without really eating anything.

They were delighted to hear Hagrid call the caretaker, Filch, 'that old git', and he added, "An' as fer that cat, Mrs. Norris, I'd like ter

introduce her to Fang some time. D'yeh know, every time I go up ter the school she follows me everywhere? Can't get rid of her - Filch puts her up to it."

They told Hagrid all about their lessons and he agreed that Snape was a bit biased and liked hardly any of the students. Ron was telling Hagrid about his brother Charlie's work with dragons when Hermione spotted a newspaper clipping. She showed it to the others, and they read:

#### GRINGOTTS BREAK-IN LATEST

Investigations continue into the break-in at Gringotts on 31 July, widely believed to be the work of dark wizards or witches unknown. Gringotts' goblins today insisted that nothing had been taken. The vault that was searched had in fact been emptied the same day. "But we're not telling what was in there, so keep your noses out if you know what's good for you," said a Gringotts spokes goblin this afternoon.

Harry whispered, "That happened on my birthday. Aunt Lia took us to get our Hogwarts supplies, and we met Hagrid at Gringotts. He said he had to get something for Dumbledore and we heard him tell a goblin that it was about a 'you-know-what' in some vault."

Nick nodded. "Aunt Lia wouldn't let us find out what it was all about, though."

Hermione gave Harry an odd look. "You have the same birthday as Harry Potter. I read about him, you know. And didn't you say you were found on the doorsteps of an orphanage with no clue as to your birthdate or identity, Harry?"

Nick looked distinctly uncomfortable and exchanged looks with Ariel. Hermione was too smart for her own good, in Nick's opinion. Harry sighed and said, "The orphange people figured out that I had to be born in July or August, so they wrote down my birthdate as the 31st of July, Hermione."

Nick quickly changed the subject back to the article to keep Hermione from prying any more into Harry's background. "I wonder if the break-in occurred while my family was there."

They exchanged looks, for they had a mystery on their hands. Susan interrupted Ron's conversation with, "Um, Hagrid, Harry and Nick said they were at Gringotts the day the break-in happened. They met you there. Do you think it could have happened while you all were at Gringotts."

"I don't know," said Hagrid shortly, not looking Susan in the eye. He quickly picked up the plate of rock cakes and offered Justin some more, who politely refused. The others exchanged looks again, figuring out that Hagrid must be hiding something.

Awhile later, they all returned back to the castle, Neville and Harry filling Ron in about the newspaper clipping they read and how the Stensons and Hagrid had been at Gringotts the day of the break-in. Ron was curious about whatever it was Hagrid had to pick up for Dumbledore and Neville asked, "What if what Hagrid fetched was what the thief, or thieves, were after?"

The others stared at him in surprise. "You could be right, Neville," said Justin. "It does make sense."

Once in the Entrance Hall, Susan asked, "Is it all right if we tell Ernie and Hannah about this?"

Harry looked at Nick, who answered, "Well, I guess so, Susan. We're friends with them, and I think they can be trusted to keep it quiet."

Harry then looked at Ariel and said, "If you're sure Daphne can be trusted to keep quiet about this, you can tell her, Ariel."

"All right," said Ariel. "I'm pretty sure I can trust her. She hasn't told any of the other Slytherins stuff that I've told her."

She headed to the Great Hall at five to eat a quick dinner before she had to report for her detention. The Slytherin table was empty except for Daphne and a couple of older students. Ariel slid into a seat at the end of the table, next to Daphne, and whispered about what had

happened at Hagrid's. Daphne almost dropped her fork in shock upon hearing that whatever Hagrid had removed from Gringotts might have been the cause for the break-in. She quickly recovered herself, though, and promised to keep her mouth shut about it.

After dinner, Ariel went to the Potions classroom, where she had to spend an unpleasant three hours scrubbing cauldrons without magic. She returned to the Slytherin common room at nine and hurried up to her dorm room, because the other Slytherins did not welcome her hanging about in the common room. The first thing she noticed was that the other Slytherins had given up transfiguring her hangings back to green. For the past week, the Slytherin girls had done so, but Ariel had always transformed to red again. Now they had given up, because the bed hangings remained as red as they had been that morning. She changed into her nightclothes and collapsed into bed, tired from all the scrubbing she had to do.

The next week, Harry and Nick found themselves being pestered by Malfoy, probably because they were Ariel's foster brothers. Their friends were being targeted as well, but not as much. Fortunately, they didn't have much contact with Malfoy, other than Potions class (for the Gryffindors) and History of Magic (for the Hufflepuffs). However, Ariel could not avoid Malfoy that much, and was the subject of many many taunts and pranks by him and many of the other Slytherins. She ignored it all to a point, then leashed her temper on the Slytherin in question.

On Tuesday, Harry saw a notice pinned up in the Gryffindor common room that said flying lessons would start on Thursday and that Gryffindor and Slytherin would the class together. He groaned and turned to look at Ron. "It's bad enough that we have to deal with Malfoy and his goons in Potions. Now we have to put up with him in flying class."

"Well, you do know how to fly already, so you won't be making a fool of yourself in front of him," said Ron.

"And on the bright side," said Hermione, "Ariel will be there."

Harry rolled his eyes. "I see Ariel every day, Hermione, so it's no big deal. She always eats breakfast with the Gryffindors, and we usually spend some time together after our classes are over. And there's Potion class."

"I'm nervous about flying," interrupted Neville. "Gran's never let me on a broom before."

As Neville was prone to accidents even when his feet were on the ground, Harry could see why. However, he merely said, "I was nervous the first time I flew, Neville. But I turned out to be a great flyer. Aunt Lia says I must have inherited my father's talent."

Hermione gave Harry an odd look. "You inherited your father's talent, Harry? But you said you were found on the doorstep of an orphanage with no clue as to your name or birthday."



He realized he had accidentally slipped up and turned red. "Er, that's not exactly true. That was just the cover story Aunt Lia had me tell so my real parentage wouldn't be found out. But you can't tell anyone."

Neville, Hermione, and Ron promised not to tell, then Ron asked, "Do Ariel and Nick know? And can you tell us the truth?"

"Yes, Ariel and Nick know," responded Harry. "And I can't tell you the truth just yet. You'll have to learn Occlumency first." Seeing the blank looks, he clarified, "Occlumency is blocking your mind from Legilimency, or the power to read minds. Aunt Lia taught me, Ariel, Nick, and Valancy Occlumency so nobody can look into our minds and find out the truth of who I really am. Dumbledore knows Legilimency and Occlumency, but he's ethical about the use of his gifts, so he's not likely to go prying in my mind. However, Aunt Lia says that Snape also has those abilities, and he's not going to be so ethical."

The others gave him shocked looks. "Snape can read minds?" asked Ron, sounding horrified.

"Well, basically, yes," answered Harry. "Though Legilimency is a bit more complex than that. Aunt Lia never taught us it, since we're too young, and there are a few guidelines set by the Ministry regarding it. There's no guidelines regarding Occlumency, though, so she felt it safe to teach us. I can teach you guys, Ariel and Nick can teach it too."

Ron, Hermione, and Neville all wanted to learn Occlumency, so Harry promised to find a private place to teach them, with the lessons starting next week. After Potions, Harry sought out Ariel and whispered, "What was that room Aunt Lia told us about? You know, the one that only appears when you need it?"

"The Room of Requirement," replied Ariel, looking puzzled. "Why do you want to know?"

"I accidentally slipped up, so now my friends know I wasn't really left on the doorstep of an orphanage," responded Harry. "They want to learn Occlumency so I can tell them the truth about who I am."

"I see," said Ariel. "Do you need me to help with the teaching?"

"Probably," replied Harry. "Where was the Room of Requirement again?"

"I think it was on the sixth or seventh floor," answered Ariel, frowning in thought. "I'm not exactly sure. You'll have to ask Nick. He remembers almost everything Aunt Lia told us about Hogwarts. Or I can check Hogwarts, a History and see if it's mentioned."

"I'll ask Nick tomorrow in Herbology," said Harry. "Erm, do you want Daphne joining us? She's your friend, and it could come in handy for her to know Occlumency, especially if you trust her enough to reveal who I really am."

"I'll ask her," said Ariel. "See you."

The next day, in Herbology, Harry found Nick and asked him where the Room of Requirement was.

"You mean that room that only appears when you need it?" asked Nick. "I believe it's on the seventh floor, opposite a tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, the guy who tried to teach ballet to trolls. Why?"

Harry answered, "I need a private place to teach Occlumency. I accidentally let slip that Aunt Lia said I inherited my father's flying talent, and Hermione realized something was going on. I had to admit that it was a cover story Aunt Lia had me to tell to hide my parentage. I told my friends they need to learn Occlumency first before I could tell them the complete truth, and they want to learn."

Nick opened his mouth to speak, but Susan spoke first. Unbeknownst to Harry and Nick, Susan and Justin were near them, and had heard everything. "You weren't left at an orphanage, Harry?"

Harry and Nick turned, startled looks on their faces. "You heard everything we said?" asked Nick.

Justin nodded. "Yes. We weren't intending to eavesdrop. It's just that we were right next to you and you were speaking loud enough for us to hear, though nobody else probably heard."

Harry exchanged looks with Nick, then said, "Well, you'd better swear not to tell anyone the truth. You are going to stick to the story about my being left at an orphanage and later being adopted."

"We swear," said Susan. "But what Ernie and Hannah? We're friends with them, and I'm certain they can be trusted to keep it quiet."

Harry, while he was friends with them, wasn't as close to them as he was to his siblings or even Ron, and didn't know them as well as Nick did. He looked over at Nick, who said, "I think Ernie and Hannah can be told, as long as they swear to keep it a secret. I guess you all might as well learn Occlumency, too, since you'll probably want to learn the complete truth about Harry."

Justin and Susan nodded and then they all returned back to their work. During lunch, Nick found Ernie and Hannah and told them everything, swearing them to secrecy first. They wanted to learn Occlumency as well, so it was arranged for Harry, Nick, and Ariel to teach their friends in the Room of Requirement, with the first lesson on Monday, at seven o'clock in the evening.

On Thursday morning, Ariel showed up for breakfast at the Gryffindor table, as usual. She took a seat next to Hermione, who was almost as nervous as Neville about flying. It wasn't something you could learn from a book, not that Hermione hadn't tried. She had checked out *Quidditch Through the Ages* from the library and listing flying tips she gotten put of it, boring everyone.

Even Ariel, who got along best with her, lost her patience after the fifth tip and snapped, "That's enough, Hermione. I've read the book before, and you don't need to tell me about it. Besides, I was nervous the first time Aunt Lia let me on a broom that wasn't a toy, and I turned out to do fine."

Neville was the only one who had been attentively to Hermione's lecture, and he looked disappointed at her being interrupted. Ariel

turned to him and said, "I'm sure you'll do fine, Neville. Aunt Lia went to school with your parents. That is, if your parents are Frank and Alice Longbottom." Neville nodded and Ariel continued, "Well, from what she said, your father was good at Quidditch. He was the Gryffindor captain during his last year at Hogwarts. Then he graduated and James Potter took mother wasn't so great at flying, but you might have inherited your father's talent."

Neville looked happier and a bit more confident, but Harry thought it might not be enough. Neville was very clumsy, and he might have an accident if he flew. Luckily, the mail arrived then, distracting them all.

A barn owl brought Neville a small package from his grandmother. He opened it excitedly and showed them all a glass ball the size of a large marble, which seemed to be full of white smoke.

"It's a Rememberall!" he explained. "Gran knows I forget things - this tells you if there's something you've forgotten to do. Look, you hold it tight like this and if it turns red - oh..." His face fell, because the Rememberall had suddenly glowed scarlet, "... you've forgotten something..."

Neville was trying to remember what he'd forgotten when Draco Malfoy, who was passing the Gryffindor table, snatched the Rememberall out of his hand. Harry and Ron jumped to their feet. They were half hoping for a reason to fight Malfoy, but Professor McGonagall who could spot trouble quicker than any teacher in the school, was there in a flash.

"What's going on?"

"Malfoy's got my Rememberall, Professor."

Scowling, Malfoy quickly dropped the Rememberall back on the table. "Just looking," he said, and he sloped away with Crabbe and Goyle behind him.

Ariel glared at Malfoy's retreating back, then opened the letter and package Aunt Lia and Valancy had sent with Sapphire. The package turned out to be a tin of cookies made in the shape of various magical

beasts, like unicorns and salamanders. The scrawled note, written by Kana, tucked in the tin said that it was for Ariel to share with Daphne, and that Valancy and Ginny had helped bake them. The letter was full of news from Valancy. She wasn't so lonely anymore, since she was able to spend time with Ginny and Luna. She had gotten over Luna's oddness, and thought her a very nice girl.

Harry and Nick had mail delivered from Edric and Hedwig, and it turned out to be almost identical letters from Valancy and a tin of cookies each as well, for them to share with their friends. Ariel got up and headed for the Slytherin table. Ignoring the furious looks of the other Slytherins, she slid into the empty seat next to Daphne, and under the cover of the table, slipped a few of the cookies into Daphne's lap. Daphne looked startled, but quickly hid it, and glanced at the note in Ariel's hand. She then looked up at Ariel and mouthed, "Thanks." Then out loud, "Get away from me, Ariel!"

Ariel feigned an angry look and snapped, "Fine! You don't want me here, I'll leave." As she stood up, she winked at Daphne, who gave her a brief smile.

At three-thirty that afternoon, Harry and the other Gryffindors hurried down the front steps into the grounds for their first flying lesson. It was a clear, breezy day and the grass rippled under their feet as they marched down the sloping lawns towards a smooth lawn on the opposite side of the grounds to the Forbidden Forest, whose trees were swaying darkly in the distance.

The Slytherins were already there, and so were twenty broomsticks lying in neat lines on the ground. Harry had heard Fred and George Weasley complain about the school brooms, saying that some of them started to vibrate if you flew too high, or always flew slightly to the left.

Their teacher, Madam Hooch, arrived. She had short, grey hair and yellow eyes like a hawk.

"Well, what are you all waiting for?" she barked. "Everyone stand by a broomstick. Come on, hurry up."

Harry glanced down at his broom. It was old and some of the twigs stuck out at odd angles.

"Stick out your right hand over your broom," called Madam Hooch at the front, "and say, 'Up!'"

"UP!" everyone shouted.

Harry's broom jumped into his hand at once, but it was one of the few that did. Ariel's flew up at once, also, and to her utter disgust, Malfoy's flew up an instant later. Ron's broom jumped up at about the same time as Malfoy's, narrowly missing hitting his face. Hermione's broom merely rolled in the grass, and Neville's hadn't moved at all. He had apparently lost some of the confidence Ariel had managed to bring out that morning, and there was a quaver in Neville's voice that said only too clearly that he wanted to keep his feet on the ground.

Madam Hooch then showed them how to mount their brooms without sliding off the end, and walked up and down the rows, correcting their grips. Harry, Ariel, Daphne, and Ron were delighted when she told Malfoy he'd been doing it wrong for years, though Daphne had to hide her smirk.

"Now, when I blow my whistle, you kick off from the ground, hard," said Madam Hooch. "Keep your brooms steady, rise a few feet and then come straight back down by leaning forwards slightly. On my whistle - three - two -"

But Neville, nervous and jumpy and frightened of being left on the ground, pushed off hard before the whistle had touched Madame Hooch's lips.

"Come back, boy!" she shouted, but Neville was rising straight up like a cork shot out of a bottle - twelve feet - twenty feet.

Harry saw his scared white face look down at the ground falling away, saw him gasp, slip sideways off the broom and - WHAM - a thud and a nasty crack and Neville lay, face down, on the grass in a heap. His broomstick was still rising higher and higher and started to drift lazily towards the Forbidden Forest and out of sight.

Madam Hooch was bending over Neville, her face as white as his. "Broken wrist," Harry heard her mutter. "Come on, boy - it's all right, up you get." She turned to the rest of the class. "None of you is to move while I take this boy to the hospital wing! You leave those brooms where they are or you'll be out of Hogwarts before you can say 'Quidditch'. Come on, dear."

Neville, his face tear-streaked, clutching his wrist, hobbled off with Madam Hooch, who had her arm around him.

No sooner were they out of earshot than Malfoy burst into laughter. "Did you see his face, the great lump?" The other Slytherins, except Daphne and Ariel, joined in.

"Shut up, Malfoy," snapped Parvati Patil.

"Ooh, sticking up for Longbottom?" said Pansy Parkinson, a hard-faced Slytherin girl. "Never thought you'd like fat little cry babies, Parvati."

"Neville's not a crybaby!" snapped Ariel. "I once sprained my ankle when I fell out of a tree and began crying from the pain, Pansy."

"Look!" said Malfoy, darting forward and snatching something out of the grass. "It's that stupid thing Longbottom's gran sent him." The Rememberall glittered in the sun as he held it up.

"Give that here, Malfoy," said Harry quietly. Everyone stopped talking to watch.

Malfoy smiled nastily. "I think I'll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to collect - how about - up a tree?"

"Give it here!" Harry yelled, but Malfoy had leapt on to his broomstick and taken off. Hovering level with the topmost branches of an oak he called, "Come and get it, Stenson!"

Harry grabbed his broom.

"No!" shouted Hermione Granger. "Madam Hooch told us not to move - you'll get us all into trouble."

Harry ignored her. Blood was pounding in his ears. He mounted the broom and kicked hard against the ground and up, up he soared, air rushed through his hair and his robes whipped out behind him. Ariel prayed that Harry wouldn't be caught and fixed her eyes on him.

He turned his broomstick sharply to face Malfoy in mid-air. Malfoy looked stunned.

"Give it here," Harry called, "or I'll knock you off that broom!"

"Oh, yeah?" said Malfoy trying to sneer, but looking worried.

Harry knew what to do. He leant forward and grasped the broom tightly in both hands and shot towards Malfoy like a javelin. Malfoy only just got out of the way in time; Harry made a sharp about turn and held the broom steady. A few people below were clapping.

"No Crabbe and Goyle to save your neck, Malfoy," Harry called.

The same thought seemed to have struck Malfoy.

"Catch it if you can, then!" he shouted, and he threw the glass ball high into the air and streaked back towards the ground.

Harry saw, as though in slow motion, the ball rise up in the air and then start to fall. He leant forward and pointed his broom handle down - next second he was gathering speed in a steep dive, racing the ball - wind whistled in his ears, mingling with the screams of people watching - he stretched out his hand - a foot from the ground he caught it, just in time to pull his broom straight, and he toppled gently on to the grass with the Rememberall clutched safely in his fist.

"HARRY STENSON!"

His heart sank faster than he'd just dived. Professor McGonagall was running towards them. He got to his feet trembling.



"Never - in all my time at Hogwarts -" Professor McGonagall was almost speechless with shock, and her glasses flashed furiously, "- how dare you - might have broken your neck -"

"It wasn't Harry's fault, Professor -"

"Be quiet, Miss Kennedy -"

"But Malfoy -"

"That's enough, Mr. Weasley. Stenson, follow me, now."

Harry caught sight of Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle's triumphant faces as he left, walking numbly in Professor McGonagall's wake as she strode towards the castle. He was going to be expelled, he just knew it.

He wanted to say something to defend himself, but there seemed to be something wrong with his voice. Professor McGonagall was sweeping along without even looking at him; he had to jog to keep up. Now he'd done it. He hadn't even lasted two weeks. He'd be packing his bags in ten minutes. What would the Aunt Lia say when he turned up on the doorstep? She'd be very disappointed with him, at the very least, and would probably ground him for life.

Up the front steps, up the marble staircase inside and still Professor McGonagall didn't say a word to him. She wrenched open doors and marched along corridors with Harry trotting miserably behind her. Maybe she was taking him to Dumbledore. He thought of Hagrid, expelled but allowed to stay on as gamekeeper. Perhaps he could be Hagrid's assistant. His stomach twisted as he imagined it, watching his siblings and the others become wizards while he stumped the grounds, carrying Hagrid's bag.

Professor McGonagall stopped outside a classroom. She opened the door and poked her head inside. "Excuse me, Professor Flitwick, could I borrow Wood for a moment?"

Wood? thought Harry, bewildered; was Wood a cane she was going to use on him? Then he remembered that Dumbledore had gotten rid

of corporal punishment when he became Headmaster and relaxed slightly.

Wood turned out to be a person, a burly fifth-year boy who came out of Flitwick's class looking confused.

"Follow me, you two," said Professor McGonagall, and they marched on up the corridor, Wood looking curiously at Harry. "In here."

Professor McGonagall pointed them into a classroom which was empty except for Peeves the poltergeist, who was busy writing rude words on the blackboard.

"Out, Peeves!" she barked.

Peeves threw the chalk into a bin, which clanged loudly, and he swooped out cursing. Professor McGonagall slammed the door behind him and turned to face the two boys.

"Harry Stenson, this is Oliver Wood. Wood - I've found you a Seeker."

Wood's expression changed from puzzlement to delight.

"Are you serious, Professor?"

"Absolutely," said Professor McGonagall crisply. "The boy's a natural. I've never seen anything like it. Have you been on a broom before?"

Harry nodded silently. He didn't have a clue what was going on, but he didn't seem to be being expelled, and some of the feeling started coming back to his legs.

"He caught that thing in his hand after a fifty-foot dive," Professor McGonagall told Wood. "Didn't even scratch himself. Charlie Weasley couldn't have done it."

Wood was now looking as though all his dreams had come true at once.

"Ever seen a game of Quidditch, Stenson?" he asked excitedly.

"Wood's the captain of the Gryffindor team," Professor McGonagall explained.

"He's just the build for a Seeker, too," said Wood, now walking around Harry and staring at him. "Light - speedy - we'll have to get him a decent broom, Professor - a Nimbus Two Thousand or a Cleansweep Seven, I'd say."

"I shall speak to Professor Dumbledore and see if we can't bend the first-year rule. Heaven knows, we need a better team than last year. Flattened in that last match by Slytherin, I couldn't look Severus Snape in the face for weeks..."

Harry recovered himself enough to speak. "Er, excuse me, but I already have a broom. Aunt Lia got me a Nimbus Two Thousand for my birthday."

Wood looked absolutely delighted. "That's wonderful, Harry! Oh, this is excellent!"

Professor McGonagall peered sternly over her glasses at Harry. "I want to hear you're training hard, Stenson, or I may change my mind about punishing you." Then she smiled one of her rare smiles and continued, "I'm sure you'll do well. You have a good broom, and a great deal of talent."

"You're joking," said Nick. It was dinnertime, and he and Ariel were at the Gryffindor table to find out what had happened. Harry had just told them and Ron what had happened since he left the grounds with McGonagall.

"Seeker?" Ron asked in shock. "But first-years never - you must be the youngest house player in about -"

"-a century," said Harry, shoveling pie in his mouth. He felt particularly hungry after the excitement of the afternoon. "Wood told me."

Ron was so amazed, so impressed; he just sat and gaped at Harry. Ariel exchanged awed looks with Nick.

"I start training next week," said Harry. "Only don't tell anyone, Wood wants to keep it a secret."

"We won't tell," said Nick, since Ron and Ariel were too amazed to even speak.

Fred and George Weasley now came into the hall, spotted Harry and hurried over.

"Well done," said George in a low voice. "Wood told us. We're on the team too - Beaters."

"I tell you, we're going to win that Quidditch Cup for sure this year," said Fred. "We haven't won since Charlie left, but this year's team is going to be brilliant. You must be good, Harry, Wood was almost skipping when he told us."

"Anyway, we've got to go; Lee Jordan reckons he's found a new secret passage way out of the school."

"Bet it's that one behind the statue of Gregory the Smarmy that we found in our first week. See you."

Fred and George hardly disappeared when someone far less welcome turned up: Malfoy, flanked by Crabbe and Goyle.

"Having a last meal, Stenson? When are you getting the train back to the Muggles?"

"You're a lot braver now you're back on the ground and you've got your little friends with you," said Harry coolly.

There was of course nothing at all little about Crabbe and Goyle, but as the High Table was full of teachers, neither of them could do more than crack their knuckles and scowl.

"I'd take you on any time on my own," said Malfoy. "Tonight, if you want. Wizard's duel. Wands only - no contact."

"I'll be Harry's second," said Nick instantly. Ariel gave him a shocked look, but kept quiet.

"Who's your second?" asked Harry.

Malfoy looked at Crabbe and Goyle, sizing them up. "Crabbe," he said. "Midnight all right? We'll meet you in the trophy room, that's always unlocked."

When they had left, Ariel demanded, "Okay, what are you doing, Nick? Why did you just volunteer to be Harry's second like that? You're not the type to break rules! You might rebel sometimes like me, but you never break rules!"

"I hate Malfoy," answered Nick calmly. "Is that reason enough? Besides, Harry needs a second since he accepted the challenge. Though I suppose if I hadn't volunteered you or Ron would have."

"Ron would probably volunteer," said Ariel, glancing at Ron who was nodding, "but I most certainly wouldn't! I may be a rebel, but I wouldn't break the rules by wandering the corridors at midnight unless I had a very good reason to do so! And being Harry's second in a duel against Malfoy is not a good reason! And if I were caught, all Snape would do is give me a week's detention. He hates me, but not enough to not favor Slytherin and take points away. And I don't want detention."

She stood up, all appetite gone, and left the Great Hall. "Well, that was unexpected," said Ron.

"Ariel's right," said Hermione, who had been listening in on their conversation. "Think of all the points you'd lose for Gryffindor and Hufflepuff, Harry and Nick, if you were caught, and you're bound to be. It's very selfish of you. "

Harry, who didn't get along with Hermione as well as Ariel did, said, "And it's none of your business, Hermione. Malfoy challenged me to a duel and I'm not about to chicken out."

"And if I want to be Harry's second, I can," said Nick. "Malfoy's getting on my nerves, with his pestering me. And we won't be caught. Aunt Lia gave us-"

"Actually, she gave it to Ariel," interrupted Harry. "She felt that Ariel was the best person to be trusted with it at Hogwarts. And after what she just said, she's not likely to let us use it."

"Drat," said Nick. "But what about the one that belonged to your father?"

"Dumbledore has it," said Harry, sounding gloomy. "That's what Aunt Lia said. My dad left it in Dumbledore's possession when he died. I won't get it unless I reveal myself."

Ron asked, "What in the world are you two talking about?"

"Oh, Invisibility Cloaks," replied Nick. "Aunt Lia gave us, or rather, Ariel, the Invisibilty Cloak that her father had given her. Harry's father had one too, but he left it with Dumbledore before he died."

Hermione frowned. "Well, it's a good thing that Ariel has the Cloak and won't let you two use it."

Harry could not believe that she could be so interfering and snapped, "I told you, it's none of your business. Nick, Ron, let's go. Good-bye, Hermione." The three boys went off to find the Room of Requirement and discuss the duel in private.

Author's Note: The ending of the chapter is rewritten, due to a very good suggestion I recieved from a reviewer, kehlencrow. She asked why I didn't let them be caught, since the Heads of the Houses would have kittens over ten students from three different houses being out of bed at the same time. It struck me as a good idea, and I decided to do a rewrite. And this way, it won't be too much like the first book. Thank you, kehlencrow, for your idea.

Ariel went up to the dorm room after spending two hours in the library to discover that her bed hangings were green, the pillow and quilts lying in a jumble next to her bed, and her trunk was upturned. She swiftly transformed the hangings red again and remade her bed. She was in the process of righting her trunk when Daphne came in. "Ariel, you have to warn Nick and Harry. Malfoy's not going to show up for the duel. I heard him talking about it during dinner. He bragged how he had set Harry and Nick up and he said he was going to tip Filch off after dinner."

Ariel made a face. "Why am I not surprised? Typical Malfoy. I knew Harry and Nick shouldn't have agreed to the duel in the first place, but they wouldn't listen to me." She thought for a moment and opened her mouth again when Tracey Davis walked in.

"Ariel, Draco's setting -," Tracey broke off when she realized that Daphne was in the room and turned bright red.

"What were you going to say, Tracey?" asked Ariel sweetly. "That Malfoy's setting Harry and Nick up? Daphne already told me."

Tracey looked at Daphne in surprise. "You have? But I thought you hated Ariel and everything."

"Well, I thought you hated Ariel," returned Daphne. "So I'm surprised that you came in to tell her about Malfoy's plot."

"Well, I didn't like her very much at first," admitted Tracey. "But what she said about Slytherin's repuation did have a point. I've been thinking things over the past few days and realized Ariel's right. Besides, Draco's annoying, and Pansy gets on my nerves. Since I had a chance to make Draco's plot backfire, I took it."

"I see," said Ariel, raising a brow. "So what-"

"I can't stay and talk," interrupted Tracey. "I just came in to warn you under the pretense of getting a book. Pansy's waiting." She grabbed a book and headed for the door, turning once to say, "Sorry about upturning your trunk and bed coverings. I didn't take part, but Pansy and Millicent did. And I won't mention about Daphne being friendly with you, Ariel."

When Tracey was gone, Daphne and Ariel exchanged looks. "Do you think we can trust her?" asked Ariel.

"Partly," replied Daphne. "I think Tracey was telling the truth, but I wouldn't go as far as being her friend. Though she is nicer than Pansy and Millicent. I certainly wouldn't tell her about the Occlumency lessons or anything else that's important, however."

"Okay, how am I going to warn Harry and Nick?" asked Ariel. "Well, I can warn Harry, since he told me the password to the Gryffindor common room, but I can't go to the Hufflepuff common room since Nick never told me the password."

"You can go to the Gryffindor common room and warn Harry," replied Daphne. "I'll go to the Hufflepuff common room and ask one of the Hufflepuffs to pass on the message to Nick."

Pansy, Tracey, and Millicent swept in the room. "Why didn't you join us, Daphne?" asked Pansy.

Daphne started and answered, "Er, I was feeling tired and came up to rest, Pansy."

"Really?" inquired Pansy. "Then why are you sitting on the edge of your bed rather than lying down?"

"I was lying down!" exclaimed Daphne. "I just happened to sit up when you entered because I was about to go to, er, the loo." She stood up and went to the bathroom. A minute later, Ariel went to the



bathroom as well. It was empty, enabling them to have a quick conversation.

"Now what?" demanded Ariel. "It's almost nine o'clock and all the students are supposed to be in their respective common rooms. It's going to be rather difficult for us to sneak out."

"We'll just wait for Pansy, Tracey, and Millie to go to bed," responded Daphne. "Once they're asleep, we'll sneak out and warn Harry and Nick. The time for the duel isn't until midnight, so we have some time. We'll just make sure not to get caught."

Ariel considered for a moment, then decided to tell Daphne about the Invisibility Cloak Aunt Lia had given into her keeping. The two girls decided it would be best to sneak out under the Cloak to warn Harry and Nick, then returned to the dorm room, a minute apart from each other.

Ariel and Daphne waited impatiently for Pansy, Tracey, and Millicent to go to bed. They didn't until eleven o'clock, however, and it was fifteen minutes to midnight when Ariel and Daphne were certain they were asleep. The two girls picked up their shoes and Ariel silently unlocked her trunk and took out the Invisibility Cloak. The common room was empty. The two girls quickly put on their shoes, got under the Cloak, and slipped quietly out.

"Harry and Nick will have probably set out for the trophy room now, so we might as well go there too," whispered Daphne. Ariel nodded and they made their way toward the trophy room. Six minutes later, they arrived, bumping into Nick, Justin, Susan, and Hannah.

Ariel pulled off the Cloak and hissed, "What are you guys doing here?"

"Nick told us what he was going to do," answered Susan. "We were trying to stop him and followed him out, and it turned out we couldn't get back in our common room as the lady in the portrait had gone on a nighttime visit to her boyfriend in another picture."

"What are you and Daphne doing here, Ariel?" demanded Nick in a harsh whisper.

"Warning you!" hissed Daphne. "I heard Malfoy brag about how he set you and Harry up during dinner. He tipped the two of you off to Filch!"

"I can't believe that-" began Nick, but he was interrupted by the arrival of Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville.

"Why are you all here?" asked Justin.

"Well, I was seeing Harry off," began Ron. "But someone had to interfere!"

Hermione made a face. "I followed Ron and Harry out, trying to stop Harry from going. When he wouldn't listen, I turned to go back in, but the Fat Lady had gone on a nighttime visit. So I ended up joining Harry and Ron."

"I forgot the password," said Neville. "I came back from the Hospital Wing and couldn't get in, so I waited out in the hall. The Bloody Baron passed by two times, so I joined Harry, Ron, and Hermione. What about you guys?"

"We were trying to stop Nick and ended up getting locked out of our common rooms too, so we joined him," replied Hannah.

"And Daphne and I are here to warn Harry and Nick!" snapped Ariel. "Malfoy set this up! He tipped off Filch, who's going to be here in a few minutes! We'd better leave!" Just at that minute, the sound of someone approaching could be heard. The group quickly ran into the trophy room and out the opposite door. Neville was the last one out the door and it shut just as the voice of Filch could be heard.

Harry pointed and they all began creeping down a long gallery full of suits of armor. Unfortunately, Neville tripped and crashed into a suit of armor. "RUN!" shouted Nick, and they all sprinted down the gallery, not looking back to see if Filch was following. They swung around the

doorpost and galloped down one corridor then another, Nick in the lead without any idea where they were or where they were going.

They ripped through a tapestry and found themselves in a hidden passageway, hurtled along it and came out near their Charms classroom, which they knew was miles from the trophy room.

"I think we've lost him," Harry panted, leaning against the cold wall and wiping his forehead.

Neville was bent double, wheezing and spluttering. Ariel glared at Nick and Harry. "This is all your fault for accepting the duel and dragging us into it."

"Well, you could have warned us sooner!" retorted Harry.

"I would have except Daphne and I had to wait until our dormmates were asleep before slipping out to warn you!" snapped Ariel.

"Enough," said Susan. "Let's get going back to our common rooms."

It wasn't going to be that simple. They hadn't gone more than a dozen paces when a doorknob rattled and something came shooting out of a classroom in front of them. It was Peeves. He caught sight of them and gave a squeal of delight.

Ariel and Daphne groaned. Harry pleaded, "Shut up, Peeves - please - you'll get us thrown out."

Peeves cackled. "Wandering around at midnight, ickle firsties? Tut, tut, tut. Naughty, naughty, you'll get caughty."

"Not if you don't give us away, Peeves, please."

"Should tell Filch, I should," said Peeves in a saintly voice, but his eyes glittering wickedly. "It's for your own good, you know."

"Get out of the way," snapped Ron, taking a swipe at Peeves - This was a big mistake.

"STUDENTS OUT OF BED!" Peeves bellowed. "STUDENTS OUT OF BED DOWN THE CHARMS CORRIDOR!"

Ducking under Peeves they ran for their lives, right to the end of the corridor, where they slammed into a door - and it was locked.

"This is it!" Ron moaned, as they pushed helplessly at the door. "We're done for! This is the end!"

They could hear footsteps, Filch running as fast as he could towards Peeves's shouts. Ariel pushed Ron aside roughly, tapped the lock, and snapped, "Alohomora!"

The lock clicked and the door swung open - they piled through it, shut it quickly. Neville, Ariel, Harry, Justin, and Nick pressed their ears against it, listening.

"Which way did they go, Peeves?" Filch was saying.

"Quick, tell me."

"Say 'please'."

"Don't mess me about, Peeves, now where did they go?"

"Shan't say nothing if you don't say please," said Peeves in his annoying sing-song voice.

"All right - please."

"NOTHING!" Ha haaa! Told you I wouldn't say nothing if you didn't say please! Ha ha! Haaaaaaa!" And they heard the sound of Peeves whooshing away and Filch cursing in rage. They all sighed in relief, but not for long.

Ariel turned around the examine where they were hiding, and just barely managed to keep from screaming.

They weren't in a room, as she had supposed. They were in a corridor. The forbidden corridor on the third floor. And now she knew why it was forbidden. Ariel quickly got the others' attention.

They were looking straight into the eyes of a monstrous dog, a dog which filled the whole space between the ceiling and floor. It had three heads. Three pairs of rolling, mad eyes; three noses, twitching and quivering in their direction; three drooling mouths, saliva hanging in slippery ropes from yellowish fangs.

Nick happened to glance down and saw that the Cerebus was standing on a trapdoor. Ariel noticed this as well, along with Hermione. There was no time to dwell on this, however.

It was standing quite still, all six eyes staring at them, and Nick knew the only reason they weren't already dead was that their sudden appearance had taken it by surprise, but it was quickly getting over that, there was no mistaking what those thunderous growls meant. Ariel groped for the door handle - between Filch and sudden death, she'd take Filch.

Ten of them fell backwards- Ariel slammed the door shut, and they ran right into Filch. He looked positively delighted. "Oh ho ho! Students out of bed! And so many, too!" Ariel quickly bundled up the Invisibility Cloak and had Nick, who was standing beside her, hide it under his robes. Justin and Hannah looked as if they wanted to run away, but they were too loyal friends to leave the others to face Filch. Neville looked absolutely petrified at having to face Filch just after seeing that huge three-headed dog. Harry patted Neville's hand comfortingly, but he couldn't suppress a feeling of doom. They were in big trouble. If Aunt Lia found out about this, she'd probably send a Howler and ground them during the Christmas holidays.

Filch cackled unpleasantly. "I had heard that two students might be wandering about the trophy room at midnight, but I didn't expect to catch ten students wandering about near the forbidden corridor. March!"

He forced the ten students down into his office, then asked, "Your Head of House?"

"Professor Snape," said Ariel bravely.

"P-Professor S-Sprout," stammered Susan.

"P-p-professor Mc-McGonagall," gasped Ron, freckles vivid on his pale face.

"Oh ho ho!" cackled Filch eagerly. "Ten students from three different houses! No Ravenclaws are part of this group, are they?" They shook their heads, and Filch looked disappointed at not being able to bring Professor Flitwick into this.

McGonagall, Snape, and Sprout were called in, and they strode into Filch's office with identical looks of fury on their faces. "What is the meaning of this?" demanded McGonagall. "How can ten students from three different houses be out-of-bounds at the same time?"

"I never thought four of my students could behave in such a manner!" exclaimed Sprout, frowning at Nick, Susan, Justin, and Hannah.

"I was expecting that Miss Stenson might do something like this, but not Miss Greengrass," snapped Snape, glaring at Ariel and Daphne.

"I want you explain the meaning of this," snapped Professor McGonagall.

Ariel decided to tell the truth. "Malfoy challenged Harry to a duel in the trophy room at midnight. Harry accepted and Nick volunteered to be his second, while Malfoy chose Crabbe to be his. Hermione and I tried to talk Harry and Nick out of it, but they wouldn't listen. Later, Daphne told me that Malfoy had set Harry and Nick up. He had tipped off Filch and wasn't going to show up at all. Daphne and I were trying to warn Nick and Harry."

"What about the rest?" demanded Professor Sprout. "How could ten students end up being involved?"

"Susan, Justin, and Hannah were trying to talk me out of it," explained Nick. "I wouldn't listen and they followed me out of the portrait-hole to convince me further. I still wouldn't listen and so they turned to go back to the common room, but they couldn't, since the lady in the painting had gone out on a nighttime visit."

"Ron was seeing Harry off," added Hermione. "I followed to try to talk Harry out of it, and ended up being locked out of the Gryffindor common room as the Fat Lady had gone a nighttime stroll. Neville was out in the corridor resting, since he'd forgotten the password, and was too scared to stay out there any longer and joined us. We all met up outside the trophy room and ran when we heard Filch coming."

Snape gave Ariel a swift, piercing look. Instantly she felt a prickle in her mind and quickly did Occlumency, blocking Snape out of her mind. A few seconds later, Harry felt a prickle in his mind and quickly set up his Occlumency shields. He then noticed Snape, glaring at him. The Nick was forced to do Occlumency as well and realized that Snape was trying to probe his mind. He caught a brief glimpse of Snape looking furious before transferring his gaze to Daphne. Luckily, Daphne's head was lowered, so Snape wouldn't be able to probe very well in her mind, as eye contact was needed for Legilimency to work well.

Professor Sprout began speaking, interrupting Snape's attempts at Legilimency. "I am most ashamed at how matters have turned out tonight. Ten students, four of them from my own house, are out-of-bounds! This has never happened before!"

Snape's gaze looked almost murderous as he looked at Ariel and Daphne. "I am very tempted to expel the two of you, Miss Greengrass and Miss Stenson. However, Professor Dumbledore would object to my expelling you over being out of bed at this time of the night, so I won't. However, you will be punished severely."

"You will all be punished severely," snapped McGonagall. "You have all disappointed me. Especially you, Mr. Stenson. I let you off from being punished this afternoon, and this is how you repay me. I won't have you removed, but you are in big trouble."

Sprout thought a moment, then said, "I think fifty points from Hufflepuff and a detention each will do for my students. And I will write to your parents or guardians."

"And fifty points from Gryffindor and detention each as well," said McGonagall. "And I will be writing to your parents or guardians about this incident as well."

Snape hesitated, then said, "I would like to arrange the punishments for my students privately." McGonagall and Sprout nodded and Snape escorted Ariel and Daphne down to his office.

Once in his office, Snape shut the door and turned on the two girls. "You have shamed Slytherin house! I cannot believe you two could do something so foolish! And being caught with a bunch of Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs! Why didn't you just run away? Filch wouldn't have been able to catch the two of you, since he would have been too busy with the others." He glared at them, then said in a cold voice, "I won't take off many points, since I don't want Slytherin to lose the House Cup, but I will take off ten points each. And you both have a week's detention with Filch, starting next Monday! And if I ever find you wandering about the corridors again after hours, I will make it twenty points and a month's detention! Now go to bed!"

Ariel and Daphne scurried off to the Slytherin common room. "Snape was scary," whispered Daphne. "Almost as scary as that three-headed dog. Thank Merlin we weren't expelled."

"I'd almost rather be expelled than have a week's detention with Filch," muttered Ariel. Seeing Daphne's incredulous look, she added, "I said 'almost', Daphne. Oh, and before I forget, I saw that the dog was standing on a trapdoor."

"Then that means it's guarding something!" exclaimed Daphne. "Perhaps it's guarding the thing Hagrid had to get out of Gringotts!" They arrived at the Slytherin common room then and after saying the password, quietly entered. They decided to talk about this later, and silently slipped up to their dormroom and went to bed.

In the Gryffindor common room, Hermione yelled at Harry and Ron for getting them into trouble. "You idiots! Thanks to you, I'm in trouble, and you've cost Gryffindor fifty points! We're lucky not to be expelled. Oh, my parents will be so disappointed that I managed to get in trouble during my second week of school once they read the letter



Professor McGonagall sends them! I told you not to go to the duel, but you wouldn't listen, and had to drag poor Neville into it too! We almost get eaten by a huge three-headed dog who's guarding a trapdoor, and then get caught by Filch and in huge trouble with our heads of house! If you and Nick weren't such idiots to go and accept Malfoy's challenge, Ariel, Daphne, and Nick's housemates wouldn't have been involved either!"

"Hermione, I feel terrible about it too," said Harry, finally able to get a word in edgewise. "Aunt Lia is going to freak when she finds out what happens and will probably send me and Nick Howlers, if she doesn't just march into Hogwarts and yell at us in person. I didn't want to get Neville, or anyone else involved with what Nick and I planned to do, but it happened. So just deal with it."

"Oh, and how will the rest of Gryffindor react when they discover that we have fifty points less than yesterday?" inquired Hermione acidly. "I'm going to bed, and I want to have nothing more to do with you, Ron, and Nick."

When Hermione had gone, Ron muttered, "Good riddance. She really gets on my nerves." Then in a louder voice, "We're sorry, Neville, about getting you dragged into all this."

Neville shrugged. "It's a-all right, Ron. Didn't Hermione say that the dog was guarding something?"

Harry nodded. "Yeah, she mentioned a trapdoor. Hermione must have looked down on the floor and saw it. I guess that might be where whatever Hagrid had to fetch from Gringotts is and that three-headed dog is guarding it."

On the way to the Hufflepuff common room, Nick was apologizing repeatedly for getting Justin, Susan, and Hannah involved and in trouble. Susan sighed. "Well, we didn't have to follow you out of the common room, Nick. It's not that big a deal."

Justin nodded. "And we could have probably escaped when Filch caught us, but we weren't going to abandon you. We're loyal and stick with each other."

"Thanks guys," said Nick. "Well, at least we shocked Snape, McGonagall, and Sprout."

Hannah giggled. "They probably had kittens when they found out that ten students from three different houses were caught out-of-bounds at the same time." Then she turned more serious. "But why is a dangerous dog being kept in Hogwarts?"

"Well, I noticed that it was standing on a trapdoor," said Nick. "I suppose it's guarding something. Maybe whatever it was Hagrid had to fetch for Dumbledore from Gringotts."

Ernie, who was waiting up for them, met them in the common room. They told him what had happened. Ernie was curious about the dog and the trapdoor it was guarding, and was extremely worried when he heard that they'd gotten caught. As it was late, they decided to go to bed and discuss this all later.

A/N: Chapter 10 has been rewritten, so please go read it first. Otherwise this chapter won't make any sense for you. Thank you.

The next day, at breakfast, Harry and Nick apologized to Hermione and Ariel for getting them in trouble. Hermione snapped, "I accept your apologies, but this doesn't mean I forgive you, Harry and Nicolas." She then picked up a book and began reading as she ate her breakfast.

Ariel sighed and said, "I forgive you guys, but you really shouldn't do stuff like that again. Daphne and I got a week's detention, since Snape only took of ten points each for us."

For all of Friday, Hermione refused to speak to Harry, Nick, or Ron. She spoke with the rest of her housemates, and with Ariel, Daphne, and the Hufflepuffs, discussing the trapdoor and what could be under it. She agreed that it was most likely whatever Hagrid had to fetch from Gringotts.

On Saturday, Hedwig appeared at the Gryffindor table, a red envelope in her talons, and landed in front of Harry. He groaned. "Oh no, Aunt Lia's sent me a Howler."

He reluctantly opened it, and an instant later, Aunt Lia's voice could be heard, magnified greatly. "HARRY JAMES STENSON! I AM MOST DISGUSTED WITH YOU! PROFESSOR MCGONAGLL HAS WRITTEN SAYING THAT YOU WERE FOUND OUT OF BED BY FILCH AT AROUND MIDNIGHT! WHAT WERE YOU DOING WANDERING ABOUT AT TIME OF NIGHT? I WAS ALSO INFORMED THAT NINE OTHER STUDENTS WERE WITH YOU, INCLUDING NICOLAS AND ARIEL. I AM MOST DISGUSTED WITH YOU. PROFESSOR MCGONAGALL SAYS THAT YOU SUPPOSEDLY WERE CHALLENGED TO A DUEL BY A DRACO MALFOY AND THAT IS WHY YOU WERE OUT OF BOUNDS. I AM SHOCKED THAT YOU COULD BE OUT OF BED FOR SUCH A PETTY REASON! I NEVER BEHAVED LIKE THIS WHEN I WAS AT SCHOOL. YOU'D BETTER BEHAVE AND NOT GET IN ANY MORE TROUBLE, OR YOU'LL BE GROUNDED FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE DURING HOLIDAYS!"

The envelope then burst into flames and fell into a tiny heap of ashes. Harry buried his head in his hands, as the other students began whispering to each other. Malfoy was sniggering. Just then, Edric flew in, an identical red envelope in his talons, and landed at the Hufflepuff table, in front of Nick. He turned bright scarlet, then opened the envelope.

"NICOLAS DANIEL STENSON! HOW DARE YOU! I CANNOT BELIEVE THAT PROFESSOR SPROUT WROTE TO ME ABOUT YOUR BEING OUT OF BED AT AROUND MIDNIGHT! JUST WERE YOU THINKING, SAYING YOU'D BE HARRY'S SECOND IN A STUPID DUEL, ACCORDING TO YOUR HEAD OF HOUSE? I THOUGHT YOU HAD MORE SENSE! AND DRAGGING YOUR HOUSEMATES INTO IT AS WELL! I AM MOST DISGUSTED WITH YOU! IF YOU EVER DO A STUNT LIKE THIS AGAIN, YOU WILL BE GROUNDED FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE DURING THE SUMMER HOLIDAYS. YOU AND YOUR SIBLINGS, EXCEPT VAL, WILL BE GROUNDED FOR THE TWO WEEKS AFTER CHRISTMAS."

Finally, Sapphire flew over to the Slytherin table, where Ariel had gone so she could talk with Daphne. The owl landed in front of Ariel, a red envelope in her talons. Ariel opened it.

"ARIEL MADELINE KENNEDY, I CANNOT BELIEVE YOU WERE OUT OF BED. PROFESSOR SNAPE DID NOT WRITE TO ME, BUT PROFESSORS MCGONAGALL AND SPROUT REPORTED THAT YOU WERE CAUGHT AS WELL. YOU MAY HAVE HAD GOOD INTENTIONS IN TRYING TO WARN HARRY AND NICOLAS, BUT THAT DOES NOT EXCUSE THE FACT YOU WERE OUT OF BED. IF THEY WOULDN'T LISTEN TO YOU AND INSISTED ON GOING TO THE DUEL, YOU SHOULD HAVE LET THEM DO SO AND HAVE THEM DEAL WITH THE CONSEQUENCES. INSTEAD, YOU WERE CAUGHT OUT OF BOUNDS AS WELL. I AM DISGUSTED WITH YOU, AND I HOPE YOU WILL NEVER BEHAVE SO FOOLISHLY AGAIN, OR YOU WILL BE GROUNDED FOR LIFE."

The envelope burst into flames. The other Slytherins looked at Ariel; several, particularly Malfoy and Pansy, snickering. Daphne gave Ariel a sympathetic look. Suddenly, an old gray owl flew to the Gryffindor

table, a Howler in his talons. It landed awkwardly in front of Ron, who turned pale. He grabbed the Howler, then ran out of the Great Hall. However, Mrs. Weasley's loud shrieks could be heard through the door as she ranted at Ron over being out of bed to be with Harry and informed him that if he put a toe out of line again, she'd bring him straight home.

Hermione looked pleased as she glanced at Harry, then in the direction of the Hufflepuff table. Then she got up and walked over to Ariel. The other Slytherins, except Daphne, did not look pleased to see Hermione, and Pansy snapped, "Go away, Granger."

"I have every right to be here," snapped Hermione in reply. "I just want to talk to Ariel."

"Well, you're a Mudblood, and we don't want your kind here," said Malfoy rudely.

Ariel jumped up, a furious expression on her face. "How dare you call Hermione that!"

Professor McGonagall came over. "What is going on here?"

"Hermione came over to talk to me," answered Ariel, "but Pansy told her to go away. When Hermione said she had every right to be here, Malfoy said she was a, well, the 'm' word, and said they didn't want her kind here."

"The 'm' word?" asked McGonagall, frowning.

"Yes," nodded Ariel. "You know, the really foul name to call Muggleborns."

McGonagall whirled on Malfoy. "I can't believe you actually used such a term, Mr. Malfoy. Twenty points from Slytherin, and if I hear you use such a term again, it will be detention. Miss Granger, you may join the Slytherin table."

She strode away and Ariel sat down. "What does 'Mudblood' mean?" asked Hermione. "I gathered that it was really bad word from your reaction, but I have no clue as to it's meaning."

"It's a really bad word to call Muggleborns," responded Daphne. "Malfoy was saying that you had dirty blood because you're Muggleborn, and not a pureblood like him." She looked sour. After spending two weeks around Ariel and her friends, she had learned that Muggleborns weren't so bad, and had given up believing in pureblood supremacy as her parents had taught her to.

"What was that thing your Aunt Lia sent you and you siblings, Ariel?" asked Hermione.

"It's a Howler," replied Ariel. "Aunt Lia must have been really mad at us if she sent Howlers to us. I know Mrs. Weasley must be really mad at Ron. Oh, Sapphire left a letter from Val."

She opened it up and read it.

"Dear Ariel,

Aunt Lia's really mad at you. Well, she actually really mad at Harry and Nick. She's not so mad at you, because you were trying to warn Harry and Nick, but she's still angry enough to send a Howler to you. I've never seen her this angry before. I really can't believe that ten students from three different houses were out of bed all in the same night, and I read the letters Professor McGonagall and Professor Sprout sent. Aunt Lia had dropped them in anger after reading them, and I picked them up to to read.

Harry and Nick are grounded for the two weeks of vacation after Christmas. You'll just be for one week, because Aunt Lia's not as angry with you as she is with them. Kana was scared over Aunt Lia freaking out like that. She had kittens. She threw a whole bunch of things that Kana had to repair, and shouted over your stupidity. After I read the letters, I flooed over to the Weasleys to get away from her, but Mrs. Weasley was just as mad over the letter she got about Ron. She didn't yell at me, but was actually pretty nice to me. But when

Ginny dragged me up to her room, we could hear Mrs. Weasley yelling over Ron. After a few minutes, we went to the Lovegoods, where nobody was yelling or angry over anything. Mr. Lovegood was really nice, and me and Ginny played with Luna for two hours. When I returned home, Aunt Lia had calmed down, but was in the process of creating the Howlers.

Please don't get in any more trouble, Ariel. But then again, you probably won't because you're so well-behaved at home, except for the occasional pranks you play on Harry.

Your sister,

Val."

Ariel folded up the letter. "Val says she's never seen Aunt Lia this angry before." She shook her head in disgust. "Really, this is mainly Harry's and Nick's fault. Well, I could have decided not to go warn them, and the others could have decided not to follow them out to try to stop them, but if Harry and Nick hadn't accepted the duel in the first place, none of this would have happened."

Hermione and Daphne nodded. Ariel picked up her spoon to finish her oatmeal when she saw Susan and Hannah run past, scarlet envelopes in their hands. She sighed again. "Oh dear, Susan and Hannah got Howlers, too. I hope Nick's really sorry about what happened." She finished breakfast to the sounds of Susan's and Hannah's parents yelling at them drifting through the door.

On Thursday, Aunt Lia sent Harry's Nimbus Two Thousand to him, with a note ordering him to not open the package in the Great Hall and to behave, or she'd take away the broom. That evening, Harry had his first practice with Oliver Wood. As he knew all about Quidditch, the game didn't have to be explained to him, and he spent the evening catching the golf balls that Oliver threw in every direction. Harry didn't miss a single one and Wood was absolutely delighted.

"That Quidditch Cup'll have our name on it this year," said Wood happily as they trudged back up to the castle. "I wouldn't be surprised

if you turn out better than Charlie Weasley, and he could have played for England if he hadn't gone off chasing dragons."

Harry grinned at the praise and wondered if perhaps he should consider a career in Quidditch. Then he put it out of his head, as that was still several years away. He didn't need to think about careers until fifth year, anyway, when he had OWLs and the career interview with McGonagall.

Harry now had Quidditch practice three times a week on top of his homework, and so the first two months ended up passing quickly. Twice a week, in the afternoon, he and his sibling were busy teaching their friends Occlumency in the Room of Requirement. As Hermione still wasn't speaking to Harry or Nick, she had to learn from Ariel. Later on, it was planned for Aunt Lia to appear. She could do Legilimency, and could test the students to make sure they could do Occlumency properly.

On September 19th, Hermione celebrated her birthday. Her friends all gave her presents, and she accepted what Harry, Ron, and Nick gave her, but she still refused to speak to them. The next day was Ariel's birthday and she received many presents as well, including a Nimbus Two Thousand from Aunt Lia and a diary that would never run out of paper from Valancy. As first years, other than Harry, weren't allowed brooms, Ariel wasn't actually sent the broom, but rather a book on Quidditch teams and a note from Aunt Lia telling her about the broom and that it was waiting for her at home.

Lessons were also becoming more and more interesting now that they had mastered the basics. On Halloween morning they woke to the delicious smell of baking pumpkin wafting through the corridors. Even better, Professor Flitwick announced in Charms that he thought they were ready to start making objects fly, something they had all been dying to try since they'd seen him make Neville's toad zoom around the classroom.

Harry was paired with Neville, but Ron ended up being partnered with Hermione. It was hard to tell whether Ron or Hermione was angrier about this, as Hermione wasn't speaking to Ron, either.



"Now, don't forget that nice wrist movement we've been practicing!" squeaked Professor Flitwick, perched on top of his pile of books as usual. "Swish and flick, remember, swish and flick. And saying the magic words properly is very important, too - never forget Wizard Baruffio, who said 's' instead of 'f' and found himself on the floor with a buffalo on his chest."

It was rather difficult, but Harry managed to levitate the feather several inches, thanks to Kana and Aunt Lia teaching them magic. Neville, however, couldn't get the feather to levitate and only managed to get it to flop a bit on the table. He looked discouraged after the first few attempts and Harry whispered, "Concentrate, Neville. You can do it. I know you can."

This gave Neville some confidence and he managed to levitate the feather, though it went zooming through the air and hit the ceiling, then fell down and knocked a book off Professor Flitwick's desk before zooming back and landing on the desk. Neville stared at the feather in shock, then exclaimed, "I did it!" Harry grinned at him.

"Very good, Mr. Longbottom and Mr. Stenson," said Professor Flitwick. "Five points to Gryffindor."

Ron, at the next table, wasn't having much luck. "Wingardium Leviosa!" he shouted, waving his long arms like a windmill.

"You're saying it wrong," Harry heard Hermione snap. "It's Wing-gardium Levi-o-sa, make the 'gar' nice and long."

"You do it, then, if you're so clever," Ron snarled.

Hermione rolled up the sleeves of her gown, flicked her wand and said, "Wingardium Leviosa!" Their feather rose off the desk and hovered about four feet above their heads.

"Oh, well done, Miss Granger!" exclaimed Professor Flitwick. "Five points to Gryffindor."

Ron was in a very bad temper by the end of the class.

"It's no wonder most people can't stand her," he said to Harry as they pushed their way into the crowded corridor. "She's a nightmare, honestly."

Someone knocked into Harry as they hurried past him. It was Hermione. Harry caught a glimpse of her face - and was startled to see that she was in tears. "I think she heard you, Ron."

"So?" said Ron, but he looked a bit uncomfortable.

Hermione didn't turn up for the next class and wasn't seen all afternoon. Ariel, Daphne, Hannah and Susan happened to enter the girls' bathroom together half an hour before the feast and were about to exchange greetings when they heard sobbing. They exchanged looks, then went to see what it was. It was Hermione.

"What's going on?" asked Susan. "Hermione, is something the matter? Can we help?"

Hermione wiped her eyes and answered, "My f-feelings are hurt!"

"What happened?" asked Daphne, putting her arm around Hermione. "Did Malfoy call you the 'm' word or something, Hermione?"

"No," said Hermione, shaking her head. "If he did, I wouldn't be in here crying. It's Ron!"

"What did Ron do or say?" inquired Ariel, frowning.

"He was annoyed at my being able to do the Levitating Charm when he couldn't," responded Hermione. "We were paired together in Charms, you see. When we were leaving class, I heard Ron say to Harry that it was no wonder most people can't stand me and that I was a nightmare."

"He what!?! " gasped Hannah. "How could Ron say something like that! You're not a nightmare!"

"Yeah," said Daphne. "You're a wonderful girl and we like you." The girls then quickly did their business and after washing their hands, gathered around Hermione again.

"I'm sure Ron feels bad about what he said," said Susan, though she didn't sound as if she really believed it.

"Well, if Ron isn't sorry now, Harry will make sure he is eventually," said Ariel. "Harry doesn't go around saying hurtful things about others and doesn't like other people doing so."

"Pay no attention to Ron," said Hannah. "He doesn't know what he's talking about. You're a great person and wonderful friend, Hermione."

Hermione cheered up a bit, but was still crying. "Thanks, girls, but my feelings are still hurt. I can't believe Ron could have said such a cruel thing. I'd expect it of Malfoy." She refused to go to the Halloween feast at all, saying she'd rather stay in the bathroom and cry everything out. She wouldn't let the other girls stay with her and told them to not miss the feast on her account. They reluctantly left the bathroom, promising to fetch her after the feast and get her some food from the kitchens.

Ariel went over to the Gryffindor table and found Ron. "The you realize what your hurtful words did to Hermione? She's in the girls' bathroom, crying her eyes out! Daphne, Hannah, Susan, and I comforted her, but she still refuses to come to the feast and would rather remain in the bathroom and cry. We offered to stay with her, but she wouldn't let us, saying we didn't need to miss the feast on her account. I hope you're happy, Ronald Bilius Weasley!"

With that, she got up and headed to sit with Daphne at the Slytherin table. Meanwhile, Hannah and Susan were telling Nick, Ernie, and Justin about Hermione. The boys were shocked over what Ron said, for they liked Hermione fairly well themselves, and even if they didn't, wouldn't have had something so rude, unless she was like Malfoy or Pansy Parkinson.

Ron looked very awkward. "I didn't realize Hermione would have taken what I said like that."

Harry and Neville gave him disapproving looks. "You should have thought first, Ron," said Harry. "Aunt Lia's always said, 'If you can't say anything nice, then don't say anything at all,' and I always go by that. Except where Malfoy's concerned, but that git deserves it."

Ron looked ashamed, but then the food appearing on the table distracted him and he apparently stopped thinking about Hermione. Harry and Neville exchanged looks, then did their best to enjoy the feast.

Harry was just helping himself to a jacket potato when Professor Quirrell came sprinting into the Hall, his turban askew and terror on his face. Everyone stared as he reached Professor Dumbledore's chair, slumped against the table and gasped. "Troll - in the dungeons - thought you ought to know."

He then sank to the floor in a dead faint.

There was uproar. It took several purple firecrackers exploding from the end of Professor Dumbledore's wand to bring silence.

"Prefects," he rumbled, "lead your houses back to the dormitories immediately!"

Percy was in his element.

"Follow me! Stick together, first-years! no need to fear the troll if you follow my orders! Stay close behind me, now. Make way, first-years coming through! Excuse me, I'm a Prefect!"

"How could a troll get in?" Harry asked as they climbed the stairs.

"Don't ask me, they're supposed to be really stupid," said Ron. "Maybe Peeves let it in for a Halloween joke."

"Maybe," said Neville, shuddering.

They passed different groups of people hurrying in different directions. As they jostled their way through a crowd of confused Hufflepuffs, Harry suddenly grabbed Ron's and Neville's arms.

"I've just thought - Hermione."

"What about her?" asked Ron.

"She doesn't know about the troll."

Ron bit his lip. "Oh, all right," he snapped. "But Percy'd better not see us."

Meanwhile, Susan and Hannah gasped at the same time, "Hermione!"

Nick, Ernie, and Justin turned to look at them. "What about Hermione?" asked Justin.

"She doesn't know about the troll!" exclaimed Hannah. "We have to warn her!"

"But-" began Ernie. Then he sighed. "You're right. She can't be left alone in the bathroom when there's a troll loose. It could leave the dungeons."

Ariel and Daphne were walking behind the other Slytherins, who had been told to head to the library as the Slytherin common room was in the dungeons area. They suddenly remembered Hermione as well and turned around to go warn her.

Harry, Ron, and Neville had just turned the corner when they heard quick footsteps behind them. The three ducked behind a large stone griffin and saw Snape cross the corridor and disappear from view. Neville asked, "Why isn't Snape down in the dungeons with the other teachers?"

Ron and Harry shrugged and the three crept along the next corridor after Snape's fading footsteps.

"He's heading for the third floor," Harry said, but Ron held up his hand.

"Can you smell something?" Harry sniffed and a foul stench reached his nostrils, a mixture of old socks and the kind of public toilet no one seems to clean.

And then they heard it - a low grunting and the shuffling footfalls of gigantic feet. Ron pointed: at the end of a passage to the left, something huge was moving towards them. They shrank into the shadows and watched as it emerged into a patch of moonlight.

It was a horrible sight. Twelve feet tall, its skin was dull, granite grey, its great lumpy body like a boulder with its small bald head perched on top like a coconut. It had short legs thick as tree trunks with flat, horny feet. The smell coming from it was incredible. It was holding a huge wooden club, which dragged along the floor because its arms were so long.

The troll stopped next to a doorway and peered inside. It wagged its long ears, making up its tiny mind, then slouched slowly into the room.

"The key's in the lock," Harry muttered. "We could lock it in."

"Good idea," said Neville nervously.

They edged towards the open door, mouths dry, praying the troll wasn't about to come out of it. With one great leap, Harry managed to grab the key, slam the door and lock it. "Yes!"

"You idiot!" shouted Susan, who was dashing forward, the other Hufflepuffs and Ariel and Daphne behind her. "That's the girls' bathroom! The one Hermione's in!"

Just then, there was a high, petrified scream. "See?" demanded Daphne, unlocking the door and wrenching it open. "We have to save Hermione!" They ran inside.

Hermione Granger was shrinking against the wall opposite, looking as if she were about to faint. The troll was advancing on her, knocking the sinks off the walls as it went.

"Distract it!" shouted Ernie. He bent down and seized a tap, then threw it as hard as he could at the wall.

The troll stopped a few feet from Hermione. It lumbered around, blinking stupidly, to see what had made the noise. Its mean little eyes saw Harry. It hesitated, then made for him instead, lifting its club as it went. Susan grabbed another tap and threw it at the troll.

Ariel pulled out her wand and shouted, "STUPEFY!" This didn't have much affect on the troll, other than to make it turn around and head for her. Justin, Neville, and Hannah ran over to Hermione, throwing pipes and taps against the wall and at the troll as they ran. When they reached Hermione, they bent down and tried to pull her towards the door, but she couldn't move, she was still flat against the wall, her mouth open with terror.

"Move, Hermione!" shouted Daphne, throwing a section of pipe at the troll. Nick tried to disarm it, but his yells of "Expelliarmus!" had no affect on the troll except to make it angry. Justin, Neville, and Hannah threw some pipes and taps at the troll, then tried again to get Hermione to move.

The shouting and the echoes seemed to be driving the troll berserk. It roared again and started towards Ron, who was nearest and had no way to escape.

Harry then did something that was both very brave and very stupid: He took a great running jump and managed to fasten his arms around the troll's neck from behind. The troll couldn't feel Harry hanging there, but even a troll will notice if you stick a long bit of wood up its nose, and Harry's wand had still been in his hand when he'd jumped - it had gone straight up one of the troll's nostrils.

Howling with pain, the troll twisted and flailed its club, with Harry clinging on for dear life; any second, the troll was going to rip him off or catch him a terrible blow with the club.

Hermione had sunk to the floor in fright; Ron pulled out his own wand - not knowing what he was going to do, he heard himself cry the first spell that came into his head: "Wingardium Leviosa!"

The club flew suddenly out of the troll's hand, rose high, high up into the air, turned slowly over - and dropped, with a sickening crack, on to its owner's head.

The troll swayed on the spot and then fell flat on its face, with a thud that made the whole room tremble.

Harry got to his feet. He was shaking and out of breath. Ron was standing there with his wand still raised, staring at what he had done. Susan and Hannah helped Hermione up, and the others stared at the troll lying on the ground.

"Is it - dead?" asked Neville hesitantly.

"I don't think so," said Harry. "I think it's just been knocked out." He bent down and pulled his wand out of the troll's nose. It was covered in what looked like lumpy grey glue. "Urgh - troll bogies." He wiped it on the troll's trousers.

A sudden slamming and loud footsteps made the three of them look up. They hadn't realized what a racket they had been making, but of course, someone downstairs must have heard the crashes and the troll's roars. A moment later, Professor McGonagall had come bursting into the room, closely followed by Professors Sprout and Snape, with Quirrell bringing up the rear. Quirrell took one look at the troll, let out a faint whimper and sat quickly down on a toilet, clutching his heart.

Snape bent over the troll, while Professors McGonagall and Sprout looked at the eleven students assembled. "What is going on here?" asked Professor McGonagall, cold fury in her voice. "This is looking too much like a repeat of what happened last month."

"You could have been killed," snapped Professor Sprout. "You are all lucky you weren't. Why aren't you all in your respective dormitories?"



Snape straightened and glared at Daphne and Ariel, then at the others.

"They were looking for me, Professors," said Hermione in a small voice.

"Miss Granger!" exclaimed McGonagall, turning to her.

"Yes," said Ariel hurriedly. "Hermione was crying in here over something Ron said, and when we heard about the troll, we realized that she was still in the bathroom. We went to warn her, and discovered the troll had entered the bathroom. So we had no choice but to try to rescue Hermione."

Hermione nodded. "If they hadn't found me, I'd be dead now. They all distracted the troll, Harry stuck his wand up its nose and Ron knocked it out with its own club. They didn't have time to come and fetch anyone. It was about to finish me off when they had arrived."

"Well - in that case ..." said Professor McGonagall, staring at them. "This is quite unexpected. But a good case of inter-house unity, wouldn't you say, Pomona and Severus?"

"What?" asked Snape. "Er, yes it is, Minerva."

Professor Sprout nodded emphatically in agreement. "Ten students from three different houses joined together to rescue another student. Very good. Dumbledore would be pleased."

Professor McGonagall nodded. "He will be when we inform him. Now, let's see, I think we can award Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin fifty points each for what these students did this evening. It was very noble of them. Not many first years would have been able to take on a full-grown mountain troll. Though then again, there were ten of them, and they were quite lucky."

Professor Sprout smiled. "Yes, they were. Well, if you're not hurt, you'd all better go back to your respective common rooms. The students are finishing the feasts in their houses. The Slytherin

common room is safe for you to go to, Miss Stenson and Miss Greengrass."

When they were all some distance away from the bathroom and the smell of the troll, Hermione turned and said, "Thanks, you guys."

"It was nothing," said Daphne. "You'd have done the same if it was one of us."

Ron, face scarlet, muttered, "I'm really sorry about what I said this afternoon. I didn't really mean it. I was just annoyed and said it in anger."

"You're forgiven, Ron," said Hermione. "And now you can do the Levitation Charm." She smiled and added, "Well, the next time you can't do a spell, we'll threaten you with a troll."

They all laughed, then Nick said, "I'm really sorry about getting you-"

"You're forgiven, Nick," interrupted Hermione. "And you too, Harry and Ron. I could have decided to just leave you guys alone and not follow you out. Friends?"

"Friends," said Harry, Nick, and Ron, nodding. All eleven of them put their hands together and swore eternal friendship. When they finished, a silvery-gold cord appeared around each of their wrists.

They looked at each other in surprise, then Ariel said, "I remember reading something about this. I think this means we're all linked." She and Hermione promised to look up some more information about this, then they all separated to go to their respective common rooms.

The next day, Ariel and Hermione did some research and discovered the silver cord that had appeared around their wrists did mean that they were linked. Apparently their friendship with one another, as well as going through fighting a troll, had created a special bond that was deeper than just ordinary friendship. In a way, it was almost like their swearing blood-brother/sisterhood. Harry had actually suggested they do so, but Neville, Hermione, Ariel, Justin, and Hannah were all a little squeamish about blood, so it never happened.

A sixth table suddenly appeared in the Great Hall the morning after the troll incident. It was much smaller than the other tables, with eleven seats. On the table was a parchment that read in writing that seemed to date from the Middle Ages, "For the Hogwarts students that have banded together despite from being in different houses. The Hogwarts Founders"

The teachers had examined the table and writing, and a number of the students had done so as well. Nick saw Professor McGonagall exchange looks with Professor Sprout and heard her say, "This has never happened before. But it seems the Founders are aware of something and had this set up. Do you suppose it could be because of what happened last night?"

A number of students tried to sit down at the table, but the chairs tipped over, dumping them on the ground. Only when Harry sat down did nothing happen. His siblings and friends joined him, and the chairs all glowed green, red, and yellow. After a few seconds, the glow disappeared and the writing on the parchment changed to, "This table now belongs to these students and more who may be a part of all this later on. We foresee that representatives of Ravenclaw will join next year, as well, as two from Gryffindor and Slytherin. Sincerely, the Founders."

Once the teachers and some of the gathered students had read the parchment, it disappeared, and everyone went to their regular tables to eat breakfast and talk about what had just occurred. From then all, the eleven students from three houses sat at the sixth table during mealtimes.

Daphne stopped hanging around the other Slytherins and spent much of her time outside of classes with Ariel and the others. Pansy first noticed this, and it spread to the other Slytherins. Most of them started looking at Daphne as a blood traitor, and she began being targeted for malicious pranks as well. After the fifth incident, Ariel lost patience and did something she normally wouldn't have done, which was see Dumbledore about it.

As she didn't know the password to Dumbledore's office, she had to ask Professor Flitwick to take her there. He gave the password (sugar quill), and the stone gargoyle moved to let Ariel in. Dumbledore was in his office, busy writing a letter, but he looked up and set down his quill when Ariel entered.

"Good afternoon, Miss Kennedy," he said pleasantly. "Is something the matter?"

Ariel, tore her gaze away from the various magical instruments in the office and said, "Yes, there is. My friend Daphne and I are being targeted by the Slytherins for various taunts and malicious pranks. While it doesn't bother me as much, I am infuriated that my best friend in Slytherin has to suffer for being a 'blood traitor'. I don't want you speaking to Professor Snape and asking him to tell the Slytherins to stop, because it wouldn't do any good. However, I would like it if Daphne and I could move to a separate room. I'm sure Hogwarts has a number of spare rooms."

Dumbledore's eyes did not twinkle as usual. "Oh dear. I had not expected that things would turn out this way. I will grant your request. I will have the house elves move your things to another room. You and Miss Greengrass will be notified of where the room is at dinner, Miss Kennedy."

"Thank you, Professor Dumbledore," replied Ariel. "Good day." She turned and left the office.

Ariel found Daphne outside the Slytherin common room, about to head for the library. She quickly told Daphne about the room change. "Oh, that's a relief. Our dorm room was getting unbearable. There's only so many times you can hear Pansy calling you a blood traitor

without it getting boring. Really, she's needs to come up with some original insults, rather than just using the same one over and over. And Malfoy's no better, either. He just repeates variations on the same insults too."

At dinner, a paper airplane flew toward Ariel, who caught it and unfolded it to read the note. It read: Dear Miss Kennedy and Miss Stenson, Something unexpected has occured. It appears that a suite of rooms has been made available not just for you, but for your friends as well. It was made quite clear to me that all eleven of you, plus any that may join you at a later time, are to occupy the suite. You will all still be part of your respective houses, but the Founders' portraits seemed to think that it would be best if you weren't separated by common rooms and shared a place together. Please inform your friends of this change, for all of your belongings have been moved there.

The suite is on the seventh floor, next to a tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. A large portrait of the Hogwarts Founders has appeared over the entrance hole and the current password is 'Hogwarts united.' The eleven of you may change the password whenever you like and inform the portrait of the change. You can still go to your house common rooms, though the suite seems to have provided a common room for you all to use.

Sincerely yours,

Professor Dumbledore.

Ariel quickly told the others about the note, and needless to say, they were all very surprised at this. "But I've never read about this happening before!" exclaimed Hermione. "This is a shock."

"Well, at least it means we'll be together and won't have to all meet up in the library or something," said Ernie. "We have our own little common room now."

After dinner, they went to their new rooms. A portrait of the Hogwarts Founders was next to the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. "Well, so

this is the group," said Godric Gryffindor. "I am very pleased that something like this has happened."

Helga Hufflepuff nodded. "The houses serve their purpose, but we wanted everyone to be united. And the eleven of you are taking a step in that direction."

Salazar Slytherin added, "I agree. I suppose it was rather foolish of me to speak out against Muggleborns and break with the other founders. But at least two of my students are taking steps to amend that."

"If only there were Ravenclaws in your group," sighed Rowena Ravenclaw. "Ah well, it seems it will have to wait until next year. You do have a sister, don't you, Ariel? There is a good chance that she will end up in Ravenclaw."

"I'm certain these students wish to see their rooms," interrupted Godric. "Password?"

"Hogwarts united," said Susan. The portrait swung open to admit them inside.

The common room looked like a smaller version of the Gryffindor common room, except there were several bookcases, and instead of red and gold, it was red, blue, yellow, and green. There were two staircases, one which led to the boys' side, and the other to the girls' side.

The boys' dorm contained six beds, and the girls' dorm five beds. The curtains and hangings were all silver and gold, with the Hogwarts crest, but otherwise looked like a dorm room of any of the other houses. Next to the dorm rooms were the bathrooms, which did not look like the regular bathrooms. It was fancier, and seemed to be more what the prefects' bathroom was probably like.

They all got settled, then the eleven of them met in their common room to talk things over.

A/N- I have been toying with the idea of creating a fifth house, just for these eleven, plus Valancy and the friends she'll make next year and

any more in future years who are different. All of them will have qualities from all the houses. If this fifth house gets formed, it will have its own Quidditch team and be part of the House Cup. If you like this idea, please tell me in a review or PM. If you are against this idea, let me know the same way. Thank you.

The next day, Ariel and Daphne noticed Snape limping and after they told the others, they began wondering if Snape had tried to get past the three-headed dog on Halloween and if he had let the troll in as a distraction. However, they had no real proof, so dismissed the idea.

Then after dinner, Athena the cat began chasing Scabbers. Ariel managed to grab hold of Athena, suffering two scratches in the process, while Ron ran after Scabbers and managed to grab him. He cuddled the trembling rat in his hand, then looked over at Ariel.

"Sorry about that, Ron," apologized Ariel. "Cats like to chase after rats and mice, but Athena has to learn that the ones that are pets of my friends are off limits. Athena, behave, and stop chasing poor Scabbers." She went upstairs to the girls' dorm and deposited Athena there, telling her that she wouldn't be allowed out for an hour as punishment.

The day before the first Quidditch match, Aunt Lia showed up and the eleven kids found her sitting in a squashy armchair in their common room that afternoon. "Hello, I'm Lia Stenson. I'm here to test how far you've gotten in Occlumency, since I also happen to know Legilimency."

"That's great, Miss Stenson!" said Hermione eagerly. "I've been wondering how well I was doing."

Aunt Lia laughed. "You must be Hermione. And please just call me Aunt Lia like my adopted children do. I haven't been called me Miss Stenson since I left Hogwarts."

The others introduced themselves, then Aunt Lia began testing them. Daphne, Hermione, Susan, and Justin were able to fully or almost fully block her out of their minds. Hermione could even supply Aunt Lia with false visions and select the memories that was allowed to be viewed. Ernie, Ron, and Neville could partially block out their minds or could only keep the blocks for a minute or two before they collapsed and Aunt Lia could access anything she wanted.

Finally she said, "Daphne, Justin, Hermione, and Susan, you're all efficient enough at Occlumency. Just keep practicing so it will stick.



Ernie, Ron, and Neville, you three need a few more lessons, and then I'm sure you'll get the hang of it. I'll stop by in two weeks and check your progress again."

Then she took Harry, Nick, and Ariel aside. "Harry, you could tell your secret now, but I assume you'd want all your friends to know at once, so you might have to wait. And Ariel and Nick, you said you wanted to find out about your biological parents. Well, Remus and I have no clue about your parents, Nick, since the paper with your name and birthdate was smudged and all that the people at the orphanage could make out was your birthdate and that your first name started with 'Nic'. As for you, Ariel, well, Remus and I know that the Kennedys are an old pureblood family that was mostly neutral on the subject on pureblood supremacy. Certainly a few of them supported Muggleborn rights and the like and a few supported pureblood supremacy, but most were neutral. You'll just have to ask the Room of Requirement to supply you with information about your parents."

Aunt Lia then bid everyone good-bye, transformed to her hawk form, and flew out the window toward Hogsmeade, where she would then transform back into human and Apparate home. Hermione immediately began pestering Ariel, Nick, and Harry with questions about Animagi and Justin suggested that they all learn to become Animagi, too.

Ariel pointed out, "Justin, it's a very complicated and difficult process. Not every witch or wizard can become an Animagus. And if you succeed, you have to be registered and everything. There's only seven registered Animagi this century, including Professor McGonagall and Aunt Lia. And only Aunt Lia's daytime form of a hawk is registered. Her owl form isn't because she felt it best to have one form kept secret and because two forms aren't all that common."

"But there are bound to be several unregistered Animagi," said Harry. "Aunt Lia told us that my father and his friends were unregistered Animagi. Well, not Uncle Remus, but his case is special."

"Who is your Uncle Remus, and why isn't he an Animagus?" asked Susan.

"He was a friend of Harry's father, and is good friends with Aunt Lia," replied Nick. "He comes by for Christmas, two weeks during the summer, and for three days every month. Aunt Lia brews the-"

"Shut up, Nicolas!" snapped Ariel. "Uncle Remus' condition isn't supposed to be broadcasted around to everyone. Aunt Lia told us that Uncle Remus is the one to decide who to tell about it."

Harry rolled his eyes and said, "Well, anyway, Uncle Remus has an illness of sorts that prevents him from becoming an Animagus. Aunt Lia makes a potion that makes his illness bearable and provides him a quiet and locked room for him to rest. And that is all we will say on the subject."

"Okay," said Ron. "Well, if your father and his friends were unregistered Animagi, then why can't we do the same?" Seeing Hermione's disapproving look, he quickly added, "I mean while we're at Hogwarts. Once we become of age, we can register ourselves with the Ministry."

Nick then admitted that he and his siblings had been doing some reading the past year on Animagi and how to become ones. The others agreed that it would be a good idea to see if they became Animagi, but decided to wait until they had all mastered Occlumency before they began learning.

The next day was the first Quidditch match, Gryffindor versus Slytherin. Hardly anyone had seen Harry play, because Wood had decided that, as their secret weapon, Harry should be kept, well, secret. However, the news that he was playing Seeker had leaked out somehow, and it wasn't his siblings or friends who had told. They had kept quiet about it. Harry didn't know which was worse - people telling him he'd be brilliant or people telling him they'd be running around underneath him, holding a mattress.

At breakfast, Harry was so nervous that he could hardly eat anything. Ariel said, "Harry, calm down. It's not like you haven't played Quidditch before. You scared Aunt Lia out of her wits when you somehow managed to fly up ten feet with your toy broomstick when you were five, and you did same thing diving after a golf ball on your

Comet Two Sixty three years ago. You're a brilliant seeker and will do well. You've inherited James Pot-er, your father's talent at Quidditch."

"But I've never played Quidditch in a match," pointed out Harry, picking at his toast. "The rest was just for fun or during a practice. I don't want to lose the match for Gryffindor and give Slytherin the satisfaction of winning. No offense, Daphne and-"

"None taken," said Daphne. "Just because Ariel and I are in Slytherin doesn't mean we automatically want our house to win. If it had a better repuation, though, we'd probably think differently."

Harry nodded and picked up his goblet of milk, then set it down again. "Harry, you have to eat," said Ron. "You need your strength, since seekers are the ones that get nobbled by the other team."

"Ron!" exclaimed Hannah. "Do you have any tact at all? You'll just make Harry even more nervous!"

By eleven o'clock the whole school seemed to be out in the stands around the Quidditch pitch. Many students had binoculars. The seats might be raised high in the air but it was still difficult to see what was going on sometimes.

The Hogwarts eleven (as they were know being known as), minus Harry, sat together. As a surprise for Harry, they had painted a large banner on the bedsheet that Ron's rat, Scabbers, had ruined.

It said Potter for President and Ariel, who was good at drawing, had done a large Gryffindor lion underneath. Then Hermione had performed a tricky little charm so that the paint flashed different colors.

Meanwhile, in the changing rooms, Harry and the rest of the team were changing into their scarlet Quidditch robes (Slytherin would be playing in green).

Wood cleared his throat for silence. "OK, men," he said.

"And women," said Chaser Angelina Johnson.

"And women," Wood agreed. "This is it."

"The big one," said Fred Weasley.

"The one we've all been waiting for," said George.

"We know Oliver's speech by heart," Fred told Harry. "We were in the team last year."

"Shut up, you two," said Wood. "This is the best team Gryffindor's had in years. We're going to win. I know it." He glared at them as if to say, "Or else." "Right. It's time. Good luck, all of you."

Harry followed Fred and George out of the changing room and, hoping his knees weren't going to give way, walked on to the pitch to loud cheers.

Madam Hooch was refereeing. She stood in the middle of the pitch, waiting for the two teams, her broom in her hand. "Now, I want a nice fair game, all of you," she said, once they were all gathered around her. Harry noticed that she seemed to be speaking particularly to the Slytherin captain, Marcus Flint, a fifth-year. Harry thought Flint looked as if he had some troll blood in him.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the fluttering banner high above, flashing Potter for President over the crowd. His heart skipped. He felt braver.

"Mount your brooms, please."

Harry clambered on to his Nimbus Two Thousand.

Madam Hooch gave a loud blast on her silver whistle. Fifteen brooms rose up, high, high into the air. They were off.

"And the Quaffle is taken immediately by Angelina Johnson of Gryffindor - what an excellent Chaser that girl is, and rather attractive, too -

"JORDAN!"

"Sorry, Professor."

The Weasley twins' friend, Lee Jordan, was doing the commentary for the match, closely watched by Professor McGonagall.

"And she's really belting along up there, a neat pass to Alicia Spinnet, a good find of Oliver Wood's, last year only a reserve - back to Johnson and - no, Slytherin have taken the Quaffle, Slytherin captain Marcus Flint gains the Quaffle and off he goes - Flint flying like an eagle up there - he's going to sc - no, stopped by an excellent move by Gryffindor Keeper Wood and Gryffindor take the Quaffle - that's Chaser Katie Bell of Gryffindor there, nice dive around Flint, off up the field and - OUCH - that must have hurt, hit in the back of the head by a Bludger - Quaffle taken by Slytherin - that's Adrian Pucey speeding off towards the goalposts, but he's blocked by a second Bludger - sent his way by Fred or George Weasley, can't tell which - nice play by the Gryffindor Beater, anyway, and Johnson back in possession of the Quaffle, a clear field ahead and off she goes - she'd really flying - dodges a speeding Bludger - the goalposts are ahead - come on, now, Angelina - Keeper Bletchley dives - misses - GRYFFINDOR SCORE!"

There were cheers from all the houses, except the Slytherins, who were moaning and howling. Hagrid turned up then, and the Hogwarts eleven quickly squeezed together to give him room. "Bin' watchin' from me hut," said Hagrid, patting a large pair of binoculars round his neck, "But it isn't the same as bein' in the crowd. No sigh of the Snitch yet, eh?"

"Nope," said Ron. "Harry hasn't had much to do yet."

"Kept outta trouble, though, that's somethin'," said Hagrid, raising his binoculars and peering skywards at the speck that was Harry.

Way up above them, Harry was gliding over the game, squinting about for some sign of the Snitch. This was part of his and Wood's game plan. "Keep out of the way until you catch sight of the Snitch," Wood had said. "We don't want you attacked before you have to be."

When Angelina had scored, Harry had done a couple of loop-the-loops to let out his feelings. Now he was back to staring around for the Snitch.

Once he caught sight of a flash of gold but it was just a reflection from one of the Weasley's wrist watches, and once a Bludger decided to come pelting his way, more like a cannon ball than anything, but Harry dodged it and Fred Weasley came chasing after it.

"All right there, Harry?" he had time to yell, as he beat the Bludger furiously towards Marcus Flint.

"Slytherin in possession,"

Lee Jordan was saying. "Chaser Pucey ducks two Bludgers, two Weasleys and Chaser Bell and speeds towards the - wait a moment - was that the Snitch?"

A murmur ran through the crowd as Adrian Pucey dropped the Quaffle, too busy looking over his shoulder at the flash of gold that had passed his left ear.

Harry saw it. In a great rush of excitement he dived downwards after the streak of gold. Slytherin Seeker Terence Higgs had seen it, too. Neck and neck they hurtled towards the Snitch - all the Chasers seemed to have forgotten what they were supposed to be doing as they hung in mid-air to watch.

Harry was faster than Higgs - he could see the little round ball, wings fluttering, darting up ahead - he put on an extra spurt of speed - WHAM!

A roar of rage from the Gryffindors below - Marcus Flint had blocked Harry on purpose and Harry's broom span off course, Harry holding on for dear life.

"Foul!" screamed the Gryffindors.

Madam Hooch spoke angrily to Flint and then ordered a free shot at the goalposts for Gryffindor. But in all the confusion, of course, the Golden Snitch had disappeared from sight again.

In the row in front of the Hogwarts eleven, Dean Thomas was yelling, "Send him off, ref! Red card!"

Ariel leaned forward and said, "Dean, this isn't football. You can't send people off in Quidditch. Though in a case like this, I wish we could. What if Flint had knocked Harry off his broom?"

Lee Jordan was finding it hard not to take sides. "So - after that obvious and disgusting bit of cheating -"

"Jordan!" growled Professor McGonagall.

"I mean, after that open and revolting foul -"

"Jordan, I'm warning you -"

"All right, all right. Flint nearly kills the Gryffindor Seeker, which could happen to anyone, I'm sure, so a penalty to Gryffindor, taken by Spinnet, who puts it away, no trouble, and we continue play, Gryffindor still in possession."

Harry dodged another Bludger and kept looking for the Snitch, annoyed by what Flint had done. If he hadn't been such a good flier and had such a tight grip on his broom, he probably would have been knocked off.

Slytherin had scored once and Gryffindor twice before Harry spotted the Snitch again. He went streaking for it, with Higgs following a few seconds later. Harry had almost reached the Snitch when a bludger came pelting at him. He flew to one side to avoid it and in the process suddenly felt something enter his sleeve and flutter about. He quickly reached in with his other arm and drew out the Snitch, wings beating futilely in his hand.

"I've caught the snitch!" Harry shouted, waving the hand with the Snitch above his head. The stands burst into cheers, except for the

Slytherins, who looked angry at losing. Flint tried to protest that catching the Snitch with your sleeve was illegal, but it made no difference, as Harry hadn't broken any rules. Lee Jordan happily shouted the results, that Gryffindor had won one hundred and eighty points to twenty.

Hagrid swept Harry in a bone-crushing hug when he came out of the changing room and his friends and siblings congratulated him on the win. Ariel then remembered Aunt Lia mentioning Hagrid's fondness for big and dangerous creatures and asked, "What do you know about a three-headed dog?"

Hagrid dropped the binoculars in shock. "How do yeh know about Fluffy?" he asked quietly. Without waiting for a reply, he pointed them to his hut.

Once inside, Justin asked incredulously, "Fluffy? You named a three-headed dog Fluffy?"

"Yeah- he's mine- bought him off a Greek chappie I met in the pub last year - I lent him to Dumbledore to guard the -"

"Yes?" asked Ernie eagerly. "Guard the what?"

"It's none of yer business," said Hagrid gruffly. "Don't ask me any more. How do yeh know about Fluffy?"

"You know the night when all of us, except Ernie, was found out of bounds, right?" asked Neville. "We met, er, Fluffy when we were hiding from Filch. Ariel had unlocked the door magically."

"Well, don't go pokin' yer noses in stuff that don't concern yeh anymore!" snapped Hagrid. "It's dangerous. You forget that dog, and you forget what it's guardin', that's between Professor Dumbledore and Nicolas Flamel -"

"Aha!" exclaimed Harry. "So there's someone called Nicolas Flamel involved, is there?"



Hagrid looked furious with himself. "Erm, we'll forget that part," said Hermione hastily, giving the others stern looks. They quickly left and headed back for the castle. Fred and George turned up and dragged Harry to the Gryffindor common room, where a party was being held to celebrate Gryffindor's win. His siblings and non-Gryffindor friends were invited to take part as well, and they all managed to have a good time for a few hours, but they still hadn't forgotten what Hagrid had told them.

When the Hogwarts eleven returned to their common room several hours later, they decided to see if they could find anything about Nicolas Flamel in the library, starting tomorrow. They also decided to stop by the Room of Requirement and help Ariel and Nick find information about their biological parents. With that, they went to their dorm rooms and got ready for bed.

Christmas was coming. One morning in mid-December, Hogwarts woke to find itself covered in several feet of snow. The lake froze solid and the Weasley twins were punished for bewitching several snowballs so that they followed Quirrell around, bouncing off the back of his turban. The few owls that managed to battle their way through the stormy sky to deliver post had to be nursed back to health by Hagrid before they could fly off again.

No one could wait for the holidays to start. While the common rooms and the Great Hall had roaring fires, the draughty corridors had become icy and a bitter wind rattled the windows in the classrooms. Worse of all were Professor Snape's classes down in the dungeons, where their breath rose in a mist before them and they kept as close as possible to their hot cauldrons.

As Ron's parents were going to visit his brother Charlie in Romania, Aunt Lia had invited Ron, Fred, George, and Percy over for Christmas rather than spending it at Hogwarts. Ron and the twins had accepted, but Percy, who didn't know Harry or his siblings that well, politely declined.

The Hogwarts eleven spent most of their free time in the library, looking up Nicolas Flamel. While most of them were certain that they had come across the name somewhere, they couldn't think of where. It was very hard to know where to begin, not knowing what Flamel might have done to get himself into a book. He wasn't in *Great Wizards of the Twentieth Century*, or *Notable Magical Names of Our Time*; he was missing, too, from *Important Modern Magical Discoveries*, and *A Study of recent Developments in Wizardry*. And then, of course, there was the sheer size of the library; tens of thousands of books; thousands of shelves; hundreds of narrow rows.

When they weren't in the library, the Hogwarts eleven were in the Room of Requirement, poring through all that was provided that would give clues of Nick's, Ariel's, and Valancy's parentages. They started with Nick, but the things they found were puzzling. First of all, they found a tiny announcement about a couple named Eva and David Goldberg, but as it was written in a foreign language, they couldn't read it. Hannah thought it was probably a marriage announcement, though.

Then they found a diary written by Eva Goldberg, but it also wasn't written in English. Ariel examined it, then shook her head. "If it were French, I might be able to translate some of it. Aunt Lia taught me. But this isn't French. It doesn't seem to be in German or Spanish, either. And this diary is old. See the year? It's 1940. And that marriage announcement was from 1938."

Hermione took the diary and flipped through it. "Look at the entry dated April 2nd, 1941. This one is in English, though the grammar and spelling are a bit poor. 'My son, Nicolas, was born today. I have much love for him, but dangerous it is for him. We are Jews, and it is a probability that we will die. A witch I am, so magic I use to send him someplace safe. England is a good place. I will write note, and use magic to send Nicolas to orphanage in England. After my loved husband and I spend month - I think it's supposed to be month - with Nicolas, we do magic to send Nicolas to safety.'"

Harry looked at Nick. "I suppose that's what happened. Your parents were Jewish wizard and witch in Poland or some other country occupied by Germany, and they did a spell to send you to safety in Great Britain. But I guess something went wrong with the spell and you got sent to the future as well."

Nick sighed. "That's probably what happened." He looked at the note that had been pinned to his blanket when he had been left at the steps of the orphanage. "The date of my birth is smudged. Only 'Apr 2, 19' is legible. And my mother did sign her name, but it's all smudged, too. All that can be made out is the 'E'. I wonder if my birth parents ever survived the Holocaust. It probably didn't happen, though. Six million Jews died. Though my parents were magic, so maybe they could have survived in hiding or did something to make the concentration camps more bearable."

After that, Neville said in a small voice, "You all know that I live with my grandmother, but I never told you guys why." He then proceeded to tell how his parents, Frank and Alice Longbottom, had been tortured to insanity by Death Eaters after Voldemort's demise. The Death Eaters had thought his parents, being Aurors, would have some idea as to Voldemort's whereabouts. Neville's parents were in a

ward at St. Mungo's, and there seemed very little chance of them recovering.

Hermione put her arm around Neville. "I don't know if I could live with something like that. You're awfully brave to shoulder it, Neville. That must be why you were sorted into Gryffindor."

Neville sighed. "I guess. But the situation with Nick's parents is just as bad. They had to give their son up because the time period in which he was born in was too dangerous.

Nick shrugged. "Well, it's all in the past. I have a loving adopted mother figure, three wonderful foster siblings, and several great friends. And after we figure out Ariel's parentage, we can find out what happened to my biological parents."

The next day, they began searching for Ariel's and Valancy's parentage. Ariel plucked a book from the pile, which turned out to be a family tree. Flipping through it, she found out that the Kennedy family was indeed an old pureblood family, though there were a few instances of a Kennedy marrying a Muggle or a Muggleborn person. However, no mention of their children was made, whereas the Kennedys that had married purebloods had their children listed.

Toward the back, Ariel found her mother, Fiona Kennedy, listed. Fiona was the daughter of Arcturus Kennedy and Margerat Prewett. As Ron's mother had been a Prewett, it meant that Ariel was related to the Weasleys. She also found that she was related to the Potter, Longbottom, Greengrass, and Bones families, though distantly, and also to the Bulstrode, Parkinson, Nott, and Black families.

Ariel then glanced at the name next to her mother, with a line between them to show they were married. She stifled a gasp when she read "Justus Malfoy." "I'm related to Draco Malfoy?" she demanded, horrified. She picked up the other book that had just appeared and groaned when she discovered that Justus Malfoy was the brother of Lucius Malfoy, Draco's father. "Oh great. Draco and I are first cousins. Could this day get any worse?"

Daphne was perusing the diaries written by Fiona Kennedy. "Well, your mother was sorted into Ravenclaw, like the Sorting Hat said. And in the one written during your mother's last year at Hogwarts, an entry says that she's been told by her parents that she's to be married to Justus Malfoy. She doesn't sound too happy about the marriage, but she has no choice, since there's nobody she can elope with. Apparently she had a boyfriend, but they broke up a couple of months ago because they weren't that compatible and argued whenever they weren't snogging in the broom cupboard."

Ron held up a mask and a newspaper clipping. "It looks like this Justus Malfoy was a supporter of You-Know-Who. It says here that there was a raid and he was one of the Death Eaters killed."

Ernie came over and looked at the article. "That happened in September of 1981, a month and a half before You-Know-Who's downfall."

"Oh, can't you just say Voldemort?" demanded Nick. The others, except Harry and Ariel, flinched.

"It's just a stupid name," said Ariel, exasperated. "He's not going to appear just because you say his name. And fear of a name just increases the fear of the person itself. That's what Aunt Lia says."

Susan held up another diary. "I think your mother had to become a Death Eater, too, Ariel. Or at least be involved in their activities. That's what it says here, though she doesn't go into any detail."

Justin looked up from the diary he was reading. "Er, I think it's possible that your father wasn't Justus Malfoy, Ariel. It says here that You-Know-Who did a spell on Fiona Kennedy that allowed him to, er, sleep with her without actually touching. And six entries ago, it says that her husband left the day before for Death Eater duties and wouldn't be back for at least a month. And a week after You-Know-Who did that spell, Fiona reports that she's starting to get morning sickness. And she did a spell that says she is pregnant and is one week along."

Ariel grabbed the diary out of Justin's hands and skimmed through it. Then she tossed on the ground angrily. "I refuse to believe that my biological father could be Voldemort! That's even worse than being born a Malfoy!"

"Well, maybe something good could come out of all this," said Hannah hesitantly. "You-Know-Who might not have been killed the night he went after the Potters. Maybe when the killing curse rebounded off from Harry Potter, it just made him lose his powers and body. You could be needed to help defeat You-Know-Who if he does return to power. Being his daughter could help."

Ariel looked at the others. "Well, I hate this news! And I wouldn't blame you if you all turned your backs on me and stopped being my friend."

"Oh please, that's ridiculous," said Ron. "Just because your birth father might be You-Know-Who doesn't mean we'll desert you. We-"

"It's desert, Ron," corrected Hermione.

"Whatever. Anyway, we know you, and you're our friend, no matter what, Ariel. Well, unless you become a Death Eater or betray us, but that's not going to happen." The others nodded emphatically.

Ariel sighed and flipped through the diaries again. She found out that Valancy was only her half-sister, as her father was Justus Malfoy. "I guess that explains her blonde hair," sighed Ariel. "Well, at least she isn't Voldemort's daughter, though she is Draco's first cousin."

Susan, who had picked up the book with the Kennedy family tree, said, "Actually, you are related to the Malfoys, though for you Draco would only be your fifth cousin or something. One of the Kennedys married a Malfoy a few generations ago."

Ariel made a face. "Well, all the pureblood families are related, so I guess I'll have to live with that."

Having found out her parentage, the search for Nicolas Flamel resumed, but they couldn't find anything. Ron, Neville, Hannah, and

Ernie were pronounced proficient enough in Occlumency the next time Aunt Lia visited. Therefore, Harry revealed who he really was. Hermione wasn't all that surprised, since she had been thinking along those lines based on Harry's birthday, the stuff he had accidentally let slip once or twice, and things she had read about Harry Potter.

All swore to keep it secret once they had gotten over their surprise over who Harry really was. As they had seen him as a regular person, and not as someone famous for three and a half months, they had little trouble in not treating him any different.

Finally the Christmas holidays arrived and the Hogwarts eleven all left Hogwarts for the break. They promised to keep in touch, and the ones from magical families promised to see if they could visit via Floo.

After the three hour drive (it was longer due to the snow), they arrived at the cottage. Aunt Lia led everyone inside and upstairs to the second floor. "Two bedrooms appeared yesterday. Ron, you have the smaller blue room, right next to Harry's. And Fred and George, you have the red room across the hall. There's two beds in there. Once all of you are settled in, please show Ron and the twins around. I'll be in the kitchen with Kana, making dinner, if you need me."

After fifteen minutes, the tour of the house began. First they went inside Harry's room, which was papered red with a pattern of gold snitches and brooms. On the walls hung posters of various Quidditch teams, since he couldn't decide on a favorite team. There was a curtained four-poster bed, a dresser, a closet, bureau, desk, bookcase, and a toy chest. Two large windows looked out on the snow-covered garden out front.

Next to Harry's room was Nick's room, with a bathroom between the rooms. Nick's room was papered yellow with a pattern of black bludgers, and had posters of his favorite Quidditch team, the Kenmare Kestrels, plus a few of famous singing groups. The furniture was the same as Harry's, except for the color.

Then they went across the hall and entered Ariel's room. Her room was papered pale blue and silver, and had posters of her favorite Quidditch team, the Holyhead Harpies, on the walls, as well as a poster of the Weird Sisters and some of Ariel's artwork . Her bedspread and bed curtains were blue with silver trim, and the furniture was blue as well. Her two windows looked out into the backyard, and there was a windowseat. An easel stood between the windowseat and book case, and there was a box of art supplies in front of it.

Next door was Valancy's room, with a bathroom between the two rooms. Her room was entirely pink, and only had three posters on the walls, one of the Weird Sisters, and two of the Holyhead Harpies. The rest of the wall space was occupied with crayon, color pencil, or watercolor pictures that Valancy had drawn in years past. Otherwise, the room was identical to Ariel's.



Downstairs was the kitchen, dining room, living room, a large library with many books, though not as many as in the library at Hogwarts, a study with a computer (Ron and the twins asked many questions about how it worked), the guest room Remus Lupin occupied whenever he visited, a small room off the kitchen with elf-sized furniture that Kana occupied, and a bathroom.

Below that was the cellar, but nobody went down there except to the portion used as a large pantry and the room used as a potions lab. Fred and George returned to the library, since they had noticed a couple of books on pranks and joke stuff.

Then Valancy suggested to the others that they go up to the attic. "We haven't been exploring in there for ages, you know. Not since that rainy day two years ago, and there's still several boxes and trunks that we haven't looked in, you know."

In the attic, Nick and Ariel quickly filled Val in on their parentage. Val was horrified to discover that she was the daughter of a Malfoy, and even more horrified to find out that Ariel was most likely Voldemort's daughter. Once she had gotten over her horror, she turned to Nick. "Er, do you think Grandmum Eva could really be your mother, Nick? She survived the Holocaust you know, and Aunt Lia told us that her last name was Goldberg until she got remarried to Granddad Caleb."

Nick turned pale and he choked, "If that's the case, then that means Aunt Lia would really be my half-sister."

Ariel gasped. "I never thought of that! Grandmum Eva told us that she survived the Holocaust, but her husband didn't. When she moved to Great Britain, she met Granddad Caleb and married him. And Aunt Lia told us that she had a half-brother who never survived World War Two."

"But that's too much of a, what's the word, a coincidence," protested Harry.

"But it all fits," said Nick, still pale. "Aunt Lia did tell us that her mother used magic to send her son to an orphanage in Great Britain. After the war ended, Grandmum Eva moved here, in 1946, searching for

her son. None of the orphanages she searched in had her son. She met Granddad Caleb, married him, and in 1948 had a son named Jacob. Then in 1950 she had Bridget, who died in the war against Voldemort. And ten years after that, she unexpectedly gave birth to Aunt Lia."

"Well, Grandmum Eva and Granddad Caleb will be here tomorrow for Christmas," said Val. "We can ask them and confirm everything."

Ron looked slightly confused, but he had gotten the gist of things. "This is weird."

"It is," said Harry, frowning. "But if you think about it, Grandmum Eva's said that Nick looks like what her son would have looked like if he had lived. And she's said that their first names and date of birth are the same. So it is entirely possible."

Valancy nodded. "Well, let's do some exploring so we can take our mind off this until our adopted grandparents arrive." They began poking through the drawers of old furniture and examining the contents of dusty boxes and trunks.

Ron opened one small trunk and pulled out a set of rather ancient and slightly moth-eaten dress robes, once a dark blue, but now very faded. Underneath was a pair of ancient blue slippers, still covered with sparkling gems. Below that was a faded and yellowed lace handkerchief, a yellowed fan with a pattern of faded roses, a tiara, a pair of yellowed gloves, and a thin book with two crumbly roses pressed in the middle. The book had lines with names penciled in.

Ariel leaned over for a look, then said, "Looks like someone's old ball outfit. Maybe it was one Aunt Lia's grandmother wore. That's who Aunt Lia inherited this cottage from."

"What about the book with names?" asked Ron.

"Probably one of those dance cards. In the old days, ladies would have a booklet or card and fill in the names of the gentlemen that would dance with her for each dance."

Ron nodded and looked further in the trunk. He found a faded and moth-eaten silk quilt, a box containing very old chesspieces, and underneath that, a silvery gray and fluid material. When he pulled it out, he realized that it was an Invisibility Cloak. "Look at what I found!"

"An Invisibility Cloak?" asked Val, frowning. "I didn't know Aunt Lia had another one."

"Aunt Lia just has the one, given to her by her mother, which she then passed along to us when we went to Hogwarts," said Ariel. "This Invisibility Cloak must have belonged to her grandmother or some other relative on her father's side of the family."

Harry bent down and picked up a badge that had fallen when Ron had shaken out the cloak. "It's an Auror badge, from at least fifty years ago. And Aunt Lia said her grandmother was once an Auror."

"This will come in handy," said Nick. "Now we have two Cloaks. One can hide three of us, but with two, it can hide six."

"If we had two more, then all eleven of us could all be out after curfew," said Ron.

"Only if there's an emergency," said Ariel severely. "There will be no repeats of what happened with the midnight duel."

Just then, Athena bounded in through the open door, something in her mouth. Ariel let out a shriek when she saw it was Scabbers. "Athena, drop Scabbers immediately!"

Ron bent down, a furious expression on his face, and scooped up Scabbers the instant Athena dropped him. Fortunately, he wasn't really hurt. "Ariel, can't you control your bloody cat?"

Ariel ignored him and scooped up Athena. "How dare you, Athena! I thought I made it clear to you that the pets of my friends aren't to be harmed in any way!" She gently spanked her cat five times, then continued, "If I find you in the same room as Scabbers, you are going

to be in very big trouble. For now, you will be locked up in my room for the rest of the holidays."

Everyone stopped searching the attic, and went downstairs. Ariel deposited Athena in her room, and Nick put the Cloak in his trunk. Then they all went downstairs to the living room, where Remus arrived several minutes later, via Floo. He greeted them, and was introduced to Ron, George, and Fred.

He froze when he spotted the rat in Ron's hands, however. The smile disappeared from his face, and he quickly excused himself. A few minutes later, he returned, Aunt Lia with him.

"Excuse me, Ron, but I would like to see your rat, please," said Aunt Lia.

Ron, looking bewildered, handed Scabbers over, who was now struggling. She stunned him before he could bite her, and ignoring Ron's protests, she and Remus bent over Scabbers, examining him.

"I thought so," said Remus. "He's missing a toe."

"And the biggest piece they could find of Pettigrew was his finger," said Lia, face grim. "I thought Sirius couldn't have betrayed the Potters, and the few times I went to visit him in Azkaban, he said Pettigrew was the one who betrayed Lily and James."

Ron and the twins looked thoroughly bewildered, but Ariel, Harry, Nick, and Val had some idea as to what was going on. Remus then looked over at Ron and said, "Here's your explanation." He pointed his wand at the stunned Scabbers and muttered a spell. A second later, the rat was now a short man. His thin, colourless hair was unkempt and there was a large bald patch on top. He had the appearance of a plump man who was starting to lose some weight. His skin looked grubby, almost like Scabbers's fur, and something of the rat lingered around his pointed nose, his very small, watery eyes.

"Scabbers is an Animagus?" asked Fred, exchanging shocked looks with George.

"That can't be Peter Pettigrew!" gasped Harry. "So he really was the one who betrayed my parents!"

"Yes, that's Wormtail," replied Remus, looking grim. He quickly explained things to Fred and George.

Aunt Lia headed for the fireplace and threw a pinch of Floo powder in. Then she shouted, "Dumbledore's office, Hogwarts!"

A minute later, she was asking for Dumbledore to come immediately. When he arrived, he was shocked to see Peter Pettigrew. "That means an innocent man has gone to prison," he said heavily.

Dumbledore un-Stunned Wormtail, but took the precaution of binding him with rope. Remus pointed his wand at Wormtail to make sure he wouldn't transform. Aunt Lia went down to the cellar and returned minutes later with a bottle of Veritserum. She forced a few drops down Wormtail's throat, then the questioning began. It was proved that Wormtail had indeed betrayed the Potters to Voldemort, and had then framed Sirius Black for it.

Finally Dumbledore said, "I will take Peter Pettigrew to the Ministry and arrange for the release of Sirius Black. Peter will have to be sent to Azkaban for the time being and a trial will be arranged. If there isn't too much 'red tape,' Sirius should be able to be released sometime tomorrow."

"I'm coming with you," said Remus.

"Me too," said Lia. "You guys stay here." She looked sternly at the seven kids. "Kana will keep an eye on you. Dinner's almost ready, so you can go to the dining room and set the table."

Two hours later, Remus and Lia returned. "Cornelius Fudge at first refused to believe that it was really Peter," said Aunt Lia. "It took Veritserum and some words with Dumbledore before Fudge believed the truth. Peter's in Auror custody, in a room with spells to keep him from transforming, and papers are being written for Sirius Black's release. He should be out tomorrow. From all the noise at the Ministry, everything will probably be in tomorrow's edition of the Prophet."

Remus sighed and he and Lia had dinner.

The next morning, Lia's parents arrived, along with a small trunk and a copy of the day's edition of the Daily Prophet. "Is it true?" demanded Grandmum Eva in slightly accented English. "Sirius Black was innocent and Peter Pettigrew is the one really responsible? And that he was hiding out as a rat for ten years with the Weasley family and you and Remus discovered him, Joyce?"

"Yes, Mother," answered Lia. "Remus and I are going to meet Sirius and take care of him after he's released. Get him cleaned up and all. We'll be back late this afternoon. Could you keep an eye on the kids, Mum and Dad?"

"Of course," said Granddad Caleb. "You and Remus go along now."

Once Lia and Remus had left, Nick quickly told Grandmum Eva what he had found out regarding his parentage, and asked if she could be his mother. She sighed and replied, "I'm sorry, dear, but I'm not. You've gotten some of your facts mixed up. First of all, my maiden name was Goldberg. Actually, I was born Miriam Goldberg. In 1938, I married a young man named Vladek Horowitz. In September of 1939, he left to fight back against the invading Germans and never returned. My son, Nicolas, was born on April 22nd, not April 2nd, of 1940. After a few months, I decided that it was not safe for him, and used magic to send him to an orphanage in Great Britain. In 1941, I used magic and created false papers, using the name Eva Kaminski. My real first name was too Jewish.

"Then in 1942, I and a number of other Polish women were rounded up and we spent the remainder of the war doing forced labor at a factory in Germany. In 1946, I went to Britain to search for my son. As I had gotten so used to answering to the name of 'Eva', I decided to keep it as my first name. I eventually found that my son had ended up at an orphanage in London. In 1943, he and the other children there were sent to live with families in the countryside, due to the air raids going on in London. He got sick while in the country, and died."

Granddad Caleb continued, "I met Eva in Diagon Alley. She had just found out about her son. I comforted her, and then we began courting. And in 1947, we were married."

"Oh," said Ariel. "So then Nick isn't related to you."

"Actually, he might be," said Grandmum Eva. "I had a third cousin or something named David. So it is possible that we're distantly related. Of course, I have no idea if he had son, or if he even got married. He was only a distant cousin, and we didn't live in the same town. He was from Lodz, and I was near Warsaw."

Granddad Caleb got up and put the presents they had brought under the decorated Christmas tree. Then he turned to the others and asked, "How was your Hanukkah?"

Harry gasped. "Oh no! We were busy with school and looking up Ariel's and Nick's parentage and something else that we totally forgot all about celebrating Hanukkah!"

Grandmum Eva sighed. "It's all right. It's not like you have to celebrate it. You're not Jewish."

"Well, there's no excuse for me," said Nick. "I am Jewish."

"But you also celebrate Christmas, and believe in the Christ child," pointed out Grandmum Eva. "Like I do. What you actually are is one of those rare people who believe in a combination of Judaism and Christianity. It is perfectly all right to me if you all were so busy with your lives that you forgot all about Hanukkah. It's not that important a holiday. Not like Passover or Christmas. Just don't forget next year. I'll send you a menorah and some candles."

In the late afternoon, Lia and Remus returned with Sirius. Sirius still looked gaunt and worn, but he had obviously bathed, shaved, gotten a haircut, and was wearing new robes of red and gold. "Hello, everyone," he said hesitantly. Then he turned to Lia and Remus. "Now will you please tell me about Harry? Dumbledore told me that someone took Harry and is raising him in America, but I could tell from the expression on your face that it wasn't true, Remus."

Lia turned to Fred and George. "Do you have any skill with Occlumency? Some people can be naturals at it."



"We don't know," said George, shrugging. "You can test us."

Lia tried, and then said, "Well, I tried, and with George, I got blocked out, while with Fred I got a jumble of stuff concerning pranks and jokes that completely diverted me. If anyone tries reading your mind, Fred, they'd get a headache and give up the attempt. All right, you two can stay, but what gets said doesn't leave this room." She and Remus then revealed Harry.

Sirius was delighted to hear that his godson was living with Lia and that she had gotten the better of Dumbledore in that matter. Fred and George were shocked to find out that Harry Stenson was actually Harry Potter, and was completely speechless. When they had recovered, they promised not to say a word about it.

During dinner, the twins remembered hearing Remus call Pettigrew "Wormtail" and asked if it had anything to do with the Marauders. Remus and Sirius nodded and explained. Then Fred and George revealed how they had gotten the Marauder's Map, and presented it to Sirius and Remus. The two remaining true Marauders smiled when they saw the map, then asked the twins if they minded having the map passed on to Harry.

"No," answered Fred. "We don't mind."

"Harry's father was a Marauder, so the map rightfully should go to him," added George. "Besides, we've memorized the contents."

Harry took the map, and said, "Fred, George, if you need to borrow this map for anything, just ask me."

The twins nodded and everyone finished dinner. After, everyone went to the living room to drink eggnog, eat cookies, and plan what to do for Christmas Eve tomorrow, and for Christmas.

The next day, Remus found some mistletoe and tacked it on the doorway of each room on the first floor. Then he put a spell on it so that whomever walked under the mistletoe would have to kiss someone else or the mistletoe would leave the doorway and follow that person around. Kana the house-elf was the only one exempt from the spell. Lia was the first person to fall prey when she entered the cushion. Kana spotted the mistletoe floating over Lia's head and said, "Miss Lia, you have to kiss someone." Lia grimaced when she looked up, then grinned mischievously and found Sirius. She then proceeded to kiss him soundly for a full minute.

Remus, Fred, and George burst into laughter, Harry, Ron, and Nick made disgusted faces, Ariel and Valancy cooed, and Grandmum Eva said, "I realize that this is the nineties, but if the two of you must kiss like that, could you please do it privately?"

Granddad Caleb then came out of the living room to see what all the commotion was about and the mistletoe tacked to the living room door began floating over his head. Ariel began giggling. "Oh, Granddad, you have to kiss someone or that mistletoe will keep floating over your head!"

Grandmum Eva blushed scarlet as Valancy teased, "Grandmum, are you going to kiss in private?"

She then straightened and said severely, "Valancy Isadora Kennedy, such behavior is not seemly." She marched over to her husband and kissed him on the cheek. The mistletoe didn't go away, however.

Remus cleared his throat and said, "Erm, Mr. Stenson is the one that has to initiate the kiss, and it can't be on the cheek, unless the person under the mistletoe is underage or he or she is kissing someone of the same gender or of a younger age."

Grandpa Caleb nodded and he and Grandmum Eva went off to a private corner to kiss. As nobody really wanted to fall prey to the mistletoe (except Sirius, Lia, and the grandparents) unless it was absolutely necessary, the kids went upstairs to have some fun. Kana ended up having to make the gingerbread house herself, but Lia and Grandmum Eva braved the mistletoe to do the cooking.

Harry, Nick, Ariel, Val, and Ron went up to the attic again to continue exploring. In an old trunk, they found some jewelry, moth-eaten robes, and an old quilt. In a rather ancient-looking box, they found old issues of the Daily Prophet and some very old journals. Ariel flipped through one and found that it was written by a witch named Charlotte Potter Stenson. "Hey, does this mean that you're related to Aunt Lia, Harry?" asked Ron.

"I think so," answered Harry. "All pureblood families are related. I'm probably Aunt Lia's fourth cousin once removed or something."

Val picked up another journal and saw that it was also written by the same witch, but the entries were a few months after the first one. This one also had some faded watercolor sketches.

Nick made a face. "Well, old journals and diaries aren't of much interest, at least not to me. Maybe they're interesting for you girls. Let's see what else is in here." He moved aside a few boxes and trunks that they'd searched previously and continued looking. Ron and Harry joined him.

They uncovered a box containing a set of ancient dress robes for a wizard, along with a top hat, a pair of yellowed gloves, a cane, and a pair of old opera glasses. Ariel put aside the journals she had been examining and joined the boys. In a trunk, she found another Invisibility Cloak, which was rather odd, for they were quite rare. A very old piece of parchment included in the trunk explained why the Invisibility Cloak was in there.

The parchment, which was a will, stated that the trunk and the contents were to go to somebody's niece or nephew. As the writing was faded, they couldn't make out whose will it was, except the last name began with a 'B'. The niece or nephew could be made out either, only "trunk and contents go to my ne" and then the letters "Ma" after the blank. They decided that whomever inherited the trunk didn't even bother to look through it and just put it away up in the attic.

The only other items of interest were something Ariel recognized as a Foe-Glass, a large Sneakoscope, and a Rememberall that was a bit

larger than the one Neville had. At this point, Remus called them for lunch and they went downstairs. They all went into the dining room, then remembered the mistletoe. Harry gave Aunt Lia a kiss on the cheek, and Nick kissed Grandmum Eva. Ariel and Val decided to kiss Remus and Granddad Caleb. Ron looked around, then bent down and gave Kana a very quick peck on the cheek. When Sirius laughingly told him that Kana didn't count, Ron turned bright crimson and then gave Grandmum Eva a kiss on the cheek. Fred and George considered their options, and then gave Ariel and Val a quick peck on the cheek.

When lunch was over, Remus relented somewhat and removed the spell on the mistletoe so that the kids could leave the dining room without suffering the effects. He didn't take it off for Sirius and Lia, however, so they had to kiss when they left the dining room.

Nick told Sirius and Aunt Lia about the stuff they had found in the attic and was told they could keep the Cloak, Sneakoscope, and Rememberall. "You can't keep the Foe-glass, however," said Aunt Lia. "You're much too young. Sirius and I will take charge of it."

The next morning, Val and Nick woke up early and then proceeded to wake the others up. Then they went rushing downstairs to the Christmas tree. The noise they made then woke up the adults and Kana and they joined the kids in the living room. Remus did not look happy to be woken up at such an hour, especially considering that the full moon was three days away. Grandmum Eva didn't look all that amused, either. "Must this happen at every Christmas?" she demanded. "I realize that opening presents is exciting, but you could wait an hour or two past six to open them."

"Get used to it," said Granddad Caleb, yawning. He went over to the Christmas tree and picked up the present he was giving to his wife. "Here you are, Eva dear. Merry Christmas."

Harry sat down by the tree and picked up the first present he saw with his name on it. He opened it to find a box of chocolate frogs from Hermione. The next present he opened was from Aunt Lia, and it turned out to be a pair of seeker's gloves. Then he opened the present from his adopted grandparents, which was a book on

Quidditch and a set of forest green dress robes. His next present was a carved wooden flute from Hagrid. Then came an emerald green sweater and a box of fudge from Mrs. Weasley, a poster of the Chudley Cannons from Ron, the book Redwall from Ariel, a chess set from Valancy, and a set of Gobstones from Nick.

Then he opened a small box from Daphne and found a silver bracelet with a spell on it that could protect him from minor spells, like the Leg-Locker Curse. The accompanying card read, "I think you'll need it, considering who you are. If Malfoy tries to hex you, you'll be protected from him. It won't do much to protect you from someone like You-Know-Who, but if you survived him once, you can again. Merry Christmas, Harry. Love, Daphne."

A much larger box was from his Hufflepuff friends and contained a book on Herbolgy, a red wool scarf, a box of Muggle sweets, and a journal. Fred and George gave him the Marauder's Map and a small box of prank items. Finally he opened his last present, which was from Remus and Sirius. It turned out to be two-way mirrors they had used back in school, a life-size model of a snitch, and a journal filled with all the prank ideas the Marauders had ever come up with.

Harry then looked over at Nick, who was unwrapping the Nimbus Two Thousand he had gotten from Aunt Lia. Apparently she had decided not to wait until his birthday to give him it. Aunt Lia finished unwrapping her presents and beckoned Harry over. "Could you come with me to the study for a moment, Harry dear."

Once in the study, she pulled out a wrapped package. "I wrote to Dumbledore, pretending to be the mysterious person who took Harry Potter to live in America and had him go to school there. I reminded him that James Potter had left his Invisibility Cloak in Dumbledore's possession and ought to be bequeathed to Harry by now. Dumbledore agreed and placed the Cloak in Gringotts to be picked up. I retrieved it on my way to get Sirius from Azkaban. Here you go."

Harry opened it and picked up his father's Invisibility Cloak. A voice in his mind said, Now you and your siblings have four Cloaks. That should cover all eleven of you if you need to wander about after hours.

Harry grinned, then noticed the roll of parchment that had fallen out. He picked it up and saw that it was a letter from Dumbledore. It wished him a Merry Christmas, then explained who he was, what Hogwarts was like, and that he was disappointed that Harry wasn't attending Hogwarts. "It was your parents' alma mater, after all," it read, "and they had hoped that you would attend as well. Your name was put down for Hogwarts when you were born, and it is a pity that your guardian sent you to a school in America instead."

Harry grinned, wondering how Dumbledore would react if he found out that Harry wasn't in America, as he supposed, but was really attending Hogwarts. He rolled up the letter again and said, "Thanks, Aunt Lia. Could you write Dumbledore and tell him thank you for giving me my father's Cloak?"

Aunt Lia smiled and nodded and Harry ran upstairs to put the Cloak away. Then he went back to the living room to join the others. By that time, all the gifts had been unwrapped and everyone was gathering their things to put them away. Kana was busy picking up the wrapping paper, ribbon, and string scattered about the floor.

Once everyone was properly dressed and had brushed their teeth and such, they went downstairs and had very nice and large breakfast. After breakfast, Grandmum Eva read the story of Jesus' birth from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Then it was followed by a variety of games, magical and Muggle. The Weasleys were quite intrigued by the game of Monopoly, which Lia had changed so that all the money was in galleons and the properties changed to places like The Three Broomsticks and Flourish and Blotts.

The game finally ended with Ariel winning, with five properties and over ten thousand galleons. Ron said, "You should market this version of Monopoly in the wizarding world, Aunt Lia."

"I'll think about it," replied Aunt Lia, getting up. She returned a few minutes later with mugs of hot chocolate and two plates of cookies in the shape of candy canes, trees, and other Christmas-related things.

Dinner was a grand affair. There were two turkeys, mounds of mashed potatoes, three gravy boats, a large glass bowl of ruby

cranberry sauce, two platters of vegetables, a tureen of buttered peas, a mince pie, and a large basket with crusty rolls. It ended with flaming pudding, Christmas cake, apple pie, and trifle for dessert.

Then everyone snuggled in the living room, with cups of eggnog and hot cocoa to drink. After a tea of turkey sandwiches, leftover mince pie, and leftover dessert, everyone bundled up and piled into a large sleigh for a ride. As they drove through the woods, they sang Christmas carols loudly, startling a few birds and two rabbits.

After an hour and half, they returned home and warmed up by the fire in the living room, with cups of hot chocolate and plates of Christmas biscuits. They stayed up talking or playing games until midnight, by which time they went upstairs for bed.

The Christmas vacation flew by. On Boxing Day, Ernie invited Harry, Nick, Ron, and Ariel over and they Flooed to his house the next day. Then Susan and Hannah did the same and all of them, except Justin, Daphne, and Hermione, were able to spend time together. Aunt Lia gave permission for the kids to come over, and Neville managed to talk his grandmother into doing the same.

On the afternoon of New Year's Eve, everyone had a shock when Daphne Greengrass appeared, dragging her trunk and carrying her owl in his cage. "Hello," she said, setting the cage on the ground. "Um, is it possible if I move in with you?"

They stared at her, then Susan asked, "Why do you want to move in, Daphne?"

"I'm running away from home," snapped Daphne. "I'm fed up with my parents. As soon as I got home, I got a big lecture for hanging around Muggleborns and blood traitors. Mother slapped me a few times and Father said I was a disgrace to the family. He said if I kept it up when school resumed, he'd send me to Durmstrang. After Christmas Day, he locked me in my room, but I was able to talk Cady, my personal elf, into letting me out today when my parents were out visiting friends."

There was a pop and a house-elf, dressed in a tea towel wrapped like a toga, appeared next to her. "Miss Daffy, everything-" She broke off as Ron and Nick burst into laughter.

Daphne glared at them. "Shut up, guys! Cady can't pronounce my name properly, so it comes out as 'Daffy'. Now, what were you going to say, Cady?"

"Everything is taken care of, Miss Daffy." Cady bowed deeply.

Daphne sighed. "I told you, you don't have to bow to me, Cady. You're my friend." She then turned to the others and explained, "My parents assigned Cady to be my personal house-elf when I was five. She's mine and has to obey me, though my parents give her orders if it's not contrary to anything I say. She is my first friend. I asked her to help me run away and told her from now on she only obeys me and anyone else I tell her to obey."



Ariel raised a brow. "Do you treat her nicely, Daphne?"

"Who do you think I am, Draco Malfoy?" demanded Daphne angrily. "Of course I treat Cady well! She's my friend, not my slave. I ask her to do things and never give her orders unless I have no other choice. If she doesn't want stay with me, I'd be happy to give her a set of clothes and set her free. And if she wanted to be paid, I'd give her wages. Though it would only be a knut or two a week, because I can't afford to pay her more."

"I know you're not Draco Malfoy," said Ariel patiently. "It's just that you were raised not to see house-elves as equals and I was worried that you might not treat Cady the way I would treat a house-elf."

"Well, I was raised to think Muggleborns were lower than dirt, but I'm still friends with Hermione and Justin, aren't I?" retorted Daphne. "It might have taken me a couple of weeks to adjust to them, but I don't think them any less than pureblood wizards." She turned to Aunt Lia and asked, "Miss Stenson, could you let me stay with you?"

"Of course, Daphne," said Lia warmly. "You are welcome to live with my family, dear."

Daphne grinned. "Thank you, Miss Stenson." She turned back to her friends and remarked, "My parents will have a fit when they come home and find me gone. I bet they'll disown me for running away. I don't care."

"Come on, Daphne," said Harry. "We'll show you to your room. A new one appeared this morning next to Ariel's and we'd all wondered why. Looks the house knew that you'd turn up and ask to live with us."

Daphne got settled in and proceeded to spend the rest of the afternoon enjoyably with her friends. In the evening, Hannah, Ernie, and the rest had to leave. A very nice dinner was served, and then everyone stayed up until midnight to welcome in the new year.

Cady was given an outfit similar to Kana's, and the two house-elves quickly became friends. When it came time for the kids to return to

Hogwarts, Daphne told Cady that she could stay at the cottage and help Kana with the housework.

The day classes started, an owl bearing a scarlet envelope swooped down at the fifth table and landed in front of Daphne. She slowly took the envelope and opened it. An angry voice, magically amplified, shouted, "DAPHNE GREENGRASS, WE ARE MOST DISGUSTED WITH YOU! HOW DARE YOU RUN AWAY AND GO LIVE WITH MUDBLOODS AND BLOOD TRAITORS! YOU HAVE BISMIRCHED THE FAMILY NAME! AS YOU NO LONGER SEEM TO UPHOLD THE FAMILY TRADITIONS, YOU ARE DISOWNED. YOU ARE NO DAUGHTER OF OURS, AND IF YOU STEP FOOT ON FAMILY PROPERTY, YOU WILL BE PUNISHED. YOUR GRINGOTTS VAULT IS TAKEN AWAY AND YOU CAN DEPEND ON THE CHARITY OF YOUR SO-CALLED FRIENDS OR THE HOGWARTS FUND FOR YOUR SCHOOLING. DO NOT BOTHER TO WRITE OR BEG FOR FORGIVENESS. WE NO LONGER RECOGNIZE YOU."

The envelope then burst into flames and crumpled into ashes. The entire school was staring at her. Daphne, looking unconcerned, swept the ashes to the floor. "I expected it, and I don't care. My parents were close-minded idiots, anyway."

Harry took her hand. "Well, you'll always have a home with us. We're your friends and will never desert you." The others emphatically agreed and Daphne smiled.

Author's Note: I would like to pair Harry and Daphne together eventually, but do readers agree? If a majority agree to this, I will make it happen. So in a review, please add if you want Harry and Daphne to be together or not. Thank you.

Quidditch practice started up again and Harry found himself busy with them, for Wood was determined to win the next match. Harry put up with them, because he did want Gryffindor to win. However, that meant he didn't have as much time to put on his homework. Luckily for him, Ariel and Hermione helped him, though they refused to do the work for him or let him copy.

The portrait of the Founders finally decided to intervene in the matter of Nicolas Flamel. They dropped hints that Flamel was very famous, old, and a friend of Professor Dumbledore. They stressed the last part, and finally Daphne got the idea to look at Dumbledore's chocolate frog card, as all the books were mostly about Dumbledore defeating Grindelwald. Dumbledore's card did mention Nicolas Flamel, as someone Dumbledore worked with in alchemy.

Hermione gasped, then went dashing up to the girls' dorm room. She came down a minute later with a very thick tome. "I never thought to look in here!" she whispered excitedly. "I got this out the library weeks ago for a bit of light reading."

"Light?" asked Ron, but Hermione told him to be quiet until she'd looked something up and started flicking frantically through the pages, muttering to herself.

At last she found what she was looking for. "I knew it! I knew it!"

"Are we allowed to speak yet?" Ron asked grumpily. Hermione ignored him.

"Nicolas Flamel," she said dramatically, "is the only known maker of the Philosopher's Stone!" This didn't have quite the effect she'd expected.

"The what?" asked the others at the same time.

"Oh, honestly, don't you guys read?" demanded Hermione impatiently. "Read that!" She pushed the book over to the others and they read:

The ancient study of alchemy is concerned with making the Philosopher's Stone, a legendary substance with astonishing powers.

The stone will transform any metal into pure gold. It also produces the Elixir of Life, which will make the drinker immortal.

There have been many reports of the Philosopher's Stone over the centuries, but the only Stone currently in existence belongs to Mr. Nicolas Flamel, the noted alchemist and opera-lover. Mr. Flamel, who celebrated his six hundred and sixty-fifth birthday last year, enjoys a quiet life in Devon with his wife, Perenelle (six hundred and fifty-eight).

"See?" asked Hermione, when they had finished. "The dog must be guarding Flamel's Philosopher's Stone! I bet he asked Dumbledore to keep it safe for him, because they're friends and he knew someone was after it. That's why he wanted the Stone was moved out of Gringotts."

"A stone that makes gold and stops ever dying!" exclaimed Susan. "No wonder someone is after it. Anyone would want it."

"And no wonder we couldn't find Flamel in that Study of Recent Developments in Wizardry," said Ron. "He's not exactly recent if he's six hundred and sixty-five, is he?" The others gave him Looks. Nick then asked, "Well, what do we do now? We know what Fluffy is guarding. But what can we do about whomever's after it?"

"Nothing," said Justin dismally. Then he looked at the Founders. "Do you know if any of the staff helped Dumbledore hide the Philosopher's Stone besides Hagrid?"

The Founders exchanged looks. Then Helga Hufflepuff finally replied, "I suppose it won't do any harm. Yes, some of the teachers helped. They-

"But we won't tell you any more," interrupted Salazar Slytherin, giving Helga a look.

"Students aren't supposed to know about this," said Godric Gryffindor contritely.

“We can give you some hints, but we really can’t say anything definite, or Dumbledore will get suspicious if you know too much,” added Rowena Ravenclaw.

“That’s all right,” said Harry, though he was really quite disappointed.

A week later was the Quidditch match between Gryffindor and Hufflepuff. Harry’s friends sat in the top row in the stands, with a banner showing their support of him. However, Nick, Justin, Ernie, Susan, and Hannah also wore yellow rosettes to support Hufflepuff, because they were still part of that house.

The match turned out to be the shortest in anyone’s memory. Hufflepuff and Gryffindor had each scored one goal when Harry spotted a flash of gold and went into a dive that drew gasps and cheers from the crowd. After a few seconds, the Hufflepuff seeker noticed and went after him.

Harry held the head start, however, as well as the faster broom. Madam Hooch turned just in time to see him streak past her. A second later, Harry pulled out of the dive, the Snitch clasped triumphantly in his head. The stands erupted, for it had to be a record.

Harry jumped off his broom, a foot from the ground. He couldn’t believe it. He’d done it – the game was over; it had barely lasted five minutes. The rest of the Gryffindors and his friends came running out onto the pitch. Ariel gave Harry a sisterly kiss on the cheek, while the others hugged him. “That was fantastic, Harry!” exclaimed Daphne.

The others congratulated him, then the Gryffindor team went into the locker room to shower and change. Harry left the changing room alone some time later, to take his Nimbus Two Thousand back to the broomshed. He had just reached the shed when he saw a hooded figure came swiftly down the front steps of the castle. Clearly not wanting to be seen, it walked as fast as possible towards the forbidden forest. Harry’s victory faded from his mind as he watched. He recognised the figure’s prowling walk. Snape was sneaking into the forest while everyone else was at dinner – what was going on?

Harry jumped back on his Nimbus Two Thousand and took off. Gliding silently over the castle, he saw Snape enter the forest at a run. Harry followed.

The trees were so thick that he couldn't see where Snape had gone. Harry flew in circles, lower and lower, until he heard voices. He glided towards them and landed noiselessly in a towering beech tree. He climbed carefully along the branches, holding tight to his broomstick, trying to see through the leaves.

Below, in a shadowing clearing, stood Snape, but he wasn't alone, Quirrell was there, too. Harry couldn't make out the look on his face, but he was stuttering worse than ever. Harry strained to catch what they were saying.

He didn't hear quite everything, but what he heard was enough. The two teachers were talking about the Philosopher's Stone, and it sounded as if Snape was after it and was pressuring Quirrell to help. Snape asked Quirrell if he'd found out how to get past that 'beast of Hagrid's yet', and something about his 'little bit of hocus pocus.' Afterwards, Snape threw his cloak over his head and strode out the clearing. It was almost dark, but Harry could see Quirrell, standing quite still as though he was petrified.

When Harry returned to the castle, his siblings and friends met him, still happy over his win. "There's a party going on in the Gryffindor common room," reported Neville. "Fred and George got some food from the kitchens. They're waiting for you."

"I have something to tell you guys," interrupted Harry. They went to their common room, where he told them about the conversation he had overheard between Snape and Quirrell.

"So you mean the Stone's only safe as long as Quirrell stands up to Snape?" inquired Hannah in alarm.

"It'll be gone by next Tuesday, then," predicted Ernie dismally.

Author's Note: Sorry that it's been a very long time since I updated. I've been busy with my own life, and I lost interest in this for a period of time. But I have regained some interest again and will do my best to update more frequently.

However, Quirrell didn't crack in the ensuing days. When they pressed their ears against the door leading to the third floor corridor, they could still hear Fluffy's growls. Also, Snape swept about in his usual bad temper.

Hermione, however, had other matters on her mind besides the Philosopher's Stone. She had begun color-coding her notes and revising for the exams. The others wouldn't have minded, except that she kept nagging for them to do the same. Even Ariel, who took schoolwork seriously, was annoyed by it. She couldn't really see the point studying for something that was over two months away, and in any case, she knew most of the material already.

When Ron tried to point out that the exams were ages away, Hermione snapped, "Ten weeks. That's not ages, that's like a second to Nicolas Flamel."

"But none of us are six hundred years old," responded Ron. "Besides, what are you revising for, you already know it all."

"What am I revising for? Are you mad? You realise we need to pass these exams to get into second year? They're very important, I should have started studying a month ago, I don't know what's got into me ..."

Unfortunately, the teachers seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Hermione. They piled so much homework on them that the Easter holidays weren't nearly as much fun as the Christmas ones.

It was hard to relax with Hermione next to you reciting the twelve uses of dragon's blood or practicing wand movements. In the end, they all joined her in the library during their free time to get through their extra homework and study.

"I'll never remember this," Ron burst out one afternoon, throwing down his quill and looking longingly out of the library window. It was the first really fine day they'd had in months. The sky was clear, forget-me-not blue and there was a feeling in the air of summer coming.

"You will, Ron," said Ariel with a sigh. "Hey, there's Hagrid! I wonder what he's doing in the library."

The others all looked up and waved to Hagrid, who shuffled into view, hiding something behind his back. He looked very out of place in his moleskin overcoat. "What are you doing here, Hagrid?" asked Ernie.

"Jus' lookin'," he said, in a shifty voice that got their interest at once. "An' what're you lot up ter?" He looked suddenly suspicious. "Yer not still lookin' fer Nicolas Flamel, are yeh?"

"Oh, we found out who he is ages ago," said Ron impressively. "And we know what that dog's guarding, it's a Philosopher's St-"

"Shhhh!" Hagrid looked around quickly to see if anyone was listening. "Don' go shoutin' about it, what's the matter with yeh?"

"Sorry, Hagrid," said Susan, giving Ron a Look. "Anyway, we're doing homework and revising for the end-of-term exams."

Hagrid nodded and shuffled off.

"What was he hiding behind his back?" asked Hermione thoughtfully. "Do you think it had anything to do with the Stone?"

"I'm going to see what section he was in," said Ron, who'd had enough of working.

He came back a minute later with a pile of books in his arms and slammed them down on the table.

"Dragons!" he whispered. "Hagrid was looking up stuff about dragons! Look at these: Dragon Species of Great Britain and Ireland; From Egg to Inferno, A Dragon Keeper's Guide."



"Aunt Lia told us that Hagrid has always wanted a dragon," said Nick slowly.

"But it's against our laws," said Ron. "Dragon-breeding was outlawed by the Warlocks' Convention of 1709, everyone knows that. It's hard to stop Muggles noticing us if we're keeping dragons in the back garden - anyway, you can't tame dragons, it's dangerous. You should see the burns Charlie's got off wild ones in Romania."

"But there aren't wild dragons in Britain?" asked Justin.

"Of course there are," said Ron. "Common Welsh Green and Hedridean Blacks. The Ministry of Magic has a job hushing them up, I can tell you. Our lot have to keep putting spells on Muggles who've spotted them, to make them forget."

"Oh no!" exclaimed Daphne. "You don't think Hagrid could have gotten hold of a dragon or dragon egg, could you? If he was looking up stuff about dragons."

There were looks of alarm and groans from the others. "I hope not," said Hannah. "If he did, he's in big trouble."

"Maybe we should visit Hagrid later and check," suggested Neville nervously.

"That's a good idea," said Ernie. "Let's cross our fingers and hope that Hagrid doesn't have a dragon."

Unfortunately, their hoping and crossing fingers didn't help. When they knocked on the door of the gamekeeper's hut an hour later, they were surprised to see that all the curtains were closed. Ariel and Daphne exchanged worried looks.

Hagrid called, "Who is it?" before he let them in and then shut the door quickly behind them.

It was stiflingly hot inside. Even though it was such a warm day, there was a blazing fire in the grate. "Oh no!" cried Nick. "It's true, you really do have a dragon's egg, Hagrid!"

Hagrid jerked in surprise and stared at him. "How do yeh know that?"

"We know what section you were in," responded Ariel. "Ron went to check."

"When we found out that you were looking up stuff about dragons, we became worried that you might have somehow gotten hold of a dragon or dragon egg," continued Hannah.

"Where did you get it, Hagrid?" said Ron, crouching over the fire to get a closer look at the egg. "It must've cost you a fortune."

"Won it," said Hagrid. "Las' night. I was down in the villiage havin' a few drinks an' got into a game of cards with a stranger. Think he was quite glad ter get rid of it, ter be honest."

"But what are you going to do with it when it's hatched?" said Hermione.

"Well, I've bin doin' some readin'," said Hagrid, pulling a large book from under his pillow. "Got this outta the library - Dragon-Breeding for Pleasure and Profit - it's a bit outta date, o' course, but it's all in here. Keep the egg in the fire, 'cause their mothers breathe on 'em, see, an' when it hatches, feed it on a bucket o' brandy mixed with chicken blood every half hour. An' see here - how ter recognise diff'rent eggs - what I got there's a Norwegian Ridegback. They're rare, them."

He looked very pleased with himself, but the others didn't. "Hagrid, you live in a wooden house," Susan said.

But Hagrid wasn't listening. He was humming merrily as he stoked the fire.

After a few minutes, Justin asked, "Hagrid, are you sure you can look after a dragon? Sure, when it's still a baby it's manageable, but what about when it grows up?"

Daphne nodded. "Eventually it'll grow too big for you to hide in your house, Hagrid. And if you try to hide it in the Forbidden Forest, it could start burning down trees. And I'm sure the other creatures in the Forest would object to a dragon."

Hagrid paused. After some more talk, where it was pointed out that the dragon would probably prefer being with other dragons, Hagrid reluctantly agreed that they could write to Ron's brother Charlie and ask if he could take the dragon. However, Hagrid insisted on having the egg hatch first and getting to know the baby dragon before sending it to Charlie. Since that was better than having Hagrid keep the dragon, they gave in.

Almost two weeks later, Edric brought a note from Hagrid. He had written only two words: It's hatching. Ron wanted to skip class and go straight down to the hut, but Hermione and Ariel wouldn't hear of it. Susan pointed out it would look odd if all eleven of them were missing from their various classes. In the end, they decided to visit Hagrid during the morning break.

Hagrid greeted them looking flushed and excited. "It's nearly out." He ushered them inside.

The egg was lying on the table. There were deep cracks in it. Something was moving inside; a funny clicking noise was coming from it. They all gathered around the table and watched with bated breath.

All at once there was a scraping noise and the egg split open. The baby dragon flopped down on to the table. It wasn't exactly pretty; Harry thought it looked like a crumpled, black umbrella. Its spiny wings were huge compared to its skinny jet body and it had a long snout with wide nostrils, stubs of horns and bulging, orange eyes. It sneezed. A couple of sparks flew out of its snout.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Hagrid murmured. He reached out a hand to stroke the dragon's head. It snapped at his fingers, showing pointed fangs.

"Bless him, look, he knows his mummy!" said Hagrid.

"Hagrid," said Hermione, "how fast do Norwegian Ridgebacks grow, exactly?"

Hagrid answered and then went back to fussing over the dragon, who he decided to name Norbert. That evening, Charlie's letter arrived, much to their relief.

Dear Ron,

How are you? Thanks for the letter - I'd be glad to take the Norwegian Ridgeback, but it won't be easy getting him here. I think the best thing will be to send him over with some friends of mine who are coming to visit me in two weeks. Trouble is, they musn't be seen carrying an illegal dragon.

Could you get the Ridgeback up the tallest tower at midnight next Saturday? They can meet you there and take him away while it's still dark.

Send me an answer as soon as possible.

Love,

Charlie

They exchanged looks. "Well, we have Invisibilty Cloaks," said Ariel. "Well, two of them, at any rate. The other two stopped working a few weeks ago, but then they tend to lose their powers over time."

"The one I inherited from my father is pretty big," said Harry. "I think it's big enough to cover both of us and Norbert."

The others agreed and after some discussion, it was decided that Harry and Ariel would take Norbert to the tower.

By the time next Saturday arrived, Nick was in the Hospital Wing. He'd taken a turn helping Hagrid feed Norbert and his hand had been bitten. Norbert's fangs apparently were poisonous, for the hand had swollen to twice its usual size by the next morning. By the afternoon, the cut had turned a nasty shade of green, so Nick had no choice but to see Madam Pomfrey.

Harry and Ariel would have felt sorry for Hagrid when the time came for him to say goodbye to Norbert if they hadn't been so worried about what they had to do. It was a very dark, cloudy night and they were a bit late arriving at Hagrid's hut because they had to wait for Peeves to get out of their way in the Entrance Hall, where he'd been playing tennis against that wall.

Hagrid had Norbert packed and ready in a large crate. "He's got lots o' rats an' some brandy fer the journey," said Hagrid in a muffled voice. "An' I've packed his teddy bear in case he gets lonely."

From inside the crate came ripping noises that sounded to Harry as though teddy was having his head torn off.

"Bye-bye, Norbert!" Hagrid sobbed, as Harry and Ariel covered the crate with the Invisibility Cloak and stepped underneath it themselves. "Mummy will never forget you!"

How they managed to get the crate back up to the castle, they never knew. Midnight ticked nearer and nearer as they heaved Norbert up the marble staircase, then another - even one of Harry's short cuts didn't make the work much easier.

"Nearly there!" Harry panted as they reached the corridor beneath the tallest tower.

Once they went up the steep spiral staircase, they stepped out into the cold night air and threw off the Cloak. About ten minutes later, four broomsticks came swooping down out of the darkness.

Charlie's friends were a cheery lot. They showed Harry and Ariel the harness they'd rigged up, so they could suspend Norbert between them. They all helped buckle Norbert safely into it and then Harry and Ariel shook hands with the others and thanked them very much.

At last, Norbert was going ... going ... gone.

They slipped back down the spiral staircase, their hearts as light as their hands, now that Norbert was off them.

With no more dragon to worry about, what could spoil their happiness?

The answer to that was waiting for them at the foot of the stairs. As they stepped into the corridor, Filch's face loomed suddenly out of the darkness. "Well, well, well," he whispered, "we are in trouble."

They'd left the Invisibility Cloak on top of the tower.

Filch took Harry and Ariel to Professor McGonagall's office. Several minutes later, McGonagall and Snape appeared, looking bad-tempered. "What were you two doing out of bed at this hour?" demanded Snape.

Harry and Ariel hung their heads, not having an answer. "Well?" asked McGonagall. "Don't you have an answer?"

Ariel finally thought of something. "We wanted to do some star-gazing, Professor."

Snape snorted and looked at her. She felt a prickling in her mind and quickly brought up her Occulemency shields, blocking him out from her mind.

"Well, that is no excuse to be wandering about," snapped Snape.

"I am most disappointed in the two of you," said McGonagall. "Fifty points each from Gryffindor and Slytherin for this."

"And both of you have detention," said Snape. "Will that be enough, Minerva?"

McGonagall nodded curtly. "Mr. Stenson, Miss Kennedy, I hope you never do something like this again. You may leave."

Ariel, who couldn't care less about Slytherin, didn't mind the loss of points. However, she did mind Gryffindor's loss of points. However, as the two houses had lost an equal amount of points, Gryffindor's chance of winning the House Cup wasn't really hurt. But now Gryffindor had lost the lead it had won from the last Quidditch match,

and Hufflepuff was now in first. Well, Nick and the other Hufflepuffs would be happy, at least.

Back in the common room, Hermione looked disgusted when she heard that Ariel and Harry had forgotten the Invisibility Cloak, but didn't say anything. She did go up to the Astronomy tower before breakfast and retrieve the Cloak, however. The others were sympathetic, though Ernie couldn't help feeling somewhat cheerful that Hufflepuff was in the lead for the House Cup now.

When the Gryffindors and Slytherins found out that Harry and Ariel were the ones to lose them the fifty points each, they were very annoyed. However, as the loss of points wasn't that major (not like losing a hundred points), and Gryffindor was in second place and still in the running, the Gryffindors eventually cooled off. Slytherin, however, wasn't pleased to be in last place (they were five points behind Ravenclaw). Though they moved to second place after Snape awarded Slytherin a number of points during Potions classes, they were still annoyed with Ariel and showed it.

Ariel, however, ignored it all and wasn't bothered, because she wanted Slytherin to end their losing streak and have another house win the House Cup. Her foster brothers and friends all stood with her, which made it easy for her to deal with the nasty comments from the Slytherins.

A week before the exams, Harry and Ariel got notes at breakfast time telling them that they were to show up at the Entrance Hall at eleven that night for their detention. When they showed up, Filch met them and took them to Hagrid, where they were told that their detention would be served in the Forbidden Forest. Ariel gasped and Harry paled, but they quickly composed themselves, remembering that Hagrid often went into the Forest and never came to harm. With a nasty cackle, Filch left.

Hagrid and Fang led Ariel and Harry into the Forest. On the way, they met a centaur named Ronan. Hagrid introduced Harry and Ariel.

"Good evening," said Ronan. "Students, are you? And do you learn much, up at the school?"

"Erm-"

"A bit," said Ariel timidly.

"A bit. Well, that's something." Ronan sighed. He flung back his head and stared at the sky. "Mars is bright tonight."

"Yeah," said Hagrid glancing up too. "Listen, I'm glad we've run into you, Ronan, 'cause there's a unicorn been hurt - you seen anythin'?"

Ronan didn't answer immediately. He stared unblinkingly upwards, then sighed again.

"Always the innocent are the first victims," he said. "So it has been for ages past, so it is now."

"Yeah," said Hagrid, "but have you seen anythin', Ronan? Anythin' unusual?"

"Mars is bright tonight," Ronan repeated while Hagrid watched him impatiently. "Unusually bright."

"Yeah, but I was meanin' anythin' unusual a bit nearer home," said Hagrid. "So you haven't noticed anythin' strange?"



Yet again, Ronan took a while to answer. At last, he said, "The Forest hides many secrets."

A movement in the trees behind Ronan made Hagrid raise his bow again, but it was only a second centaur, black-haired and - bodied and wilder looking than Ronan.

"Hullo, Bane," said Hagrid. "All right?"

"Good evening, Hagrid, I hope you are well?"

"Well enough. Look, I've jus' bin askin' Ronan, you seen anythin' odd in here lately? Only there's a unicorn bin injured - would yeh know anythin' about it?"

Bane walked over to stand next to Ronan. He looked skywards. "Mars is bright tonight," he said simply.

"We've heard," said Hagrid grumpily. "Well, if either of you do see anythin', let me know, won't yeh? We'll be off, then."

Harry and Ariel followed him out of the clearing, staring over their shoulders at Ronan and Bane until the trees blocked their view.

"Never," said Hagrid irritably, "try an' get a straight answer out of a centaur. Ruddy star-gazers. Not interested in anythin' closer'n the moon."

"Are there many of them in here?" asked Ariel.

"Oh, a fair few ... Keep themselves to themselves mostly, but they're good enough about turnin' up if I ever want a word. They're deep, mind, centaurs ... they know things ... jus' don' let on much."

"D'you think that was a centaur we heard earlier?" said Harry.

"Did that sound like hooves to you? Nah, if yeh ask me, that was what's bin killin' the unicorns - never heard anythin' like it before."

Harry couldn't help shivering and Ariel grabbed his hand. The three and Fang continued on their way. Once, Ariel stumbled and fell and Harry stopped to help her up. After making sure that she was all right, they turned to discover that they's lost Hagrid. He had gone on ahead without noticing that Ariel had fallen.

The two exchanged looks and then continued on in the direction that they thought Hagrid had gone. However, they guessed wrong, for after five minutes of walking very quickly, they hadn't come across either Hagrid or Fang. The two tried to retrace their steps, but it only served to further confuse them. They continued walking around, in hopes of finding Hagrid.

After several minutes, Ariel took out her wand with the intention of sending up sparks in hopes that Hagrid would see and come over. Harry gasped and grabbed her arm before she could do so. She froze and looked in the direction that he was pointing. The unicorn was lying in a clearing ahead of them, silvery blood spilling out onto the ground.

"Oh no!" exclaimed Ariel quietly. "The poor unicorn!"

"What's that?" asked Harry. Ariel raised her gaze slightly to see a cloaked figure move swiftly toward the dead unicorn. As she watched, the figure bent over the unicorn and appeared to be drinking its blood.

Harry and Ariel stood, frozen in shock and disgust. Finally Harry came to his senses and shook Ariel. "We have to leave now!"

Unfortunately, the cloaked figure heard him, for it raised its head and stared at the two. Then it got up and began moving towards them. Ariel let out a scream and stumbled backwards. Harry felt a pain pierced his head like he'd never felt before, it was as though his hidden scar was on fire - half-blinded, he staggered backwards. Suddenly, there was a thundering of hooves and a centaur appeared. The cloaked figure turned and fled.

The centaur turned and faced the two kids. He wasn't Ronan or Bane. After introducing himself as Firenze, he said that the Forest was not safe for those two and offered to escort them to Hagrid on his back.

Ariel, who had read about centaurs, was very surprised. They were a very proud race that had insisted on being classified as beasts rather than beings and considered themselves superior to humans. Carrying a human on their backs was unheard of. Even in Muggle literature, centaurs didn't carry humans on their backs. The only exception had been in the Chronicles of Narnia series, and even then, the centaurs in Narnia normally didn't carry humans.

Bane and Ronan showed up after Harry and Ariel had climbed on Firenze's back.

"Firenze!" Bane thundered. "What are you doing? You have two humans on your back! Have you no shame? Are you a common mule?"

"Do you realise who these two are?" said Firenze. "They are important. The quicker they leaves the Forest, the better."

"What have you been telling them?" growled Bane. "Remember, Firenze, we are sworn not to set ourselves against the heavens. Have we not read what is to come in the movements of the planets?"

Ronan pawed the ground nervously. "I'm sure Firenze thought he was acting for the best," he said, in his gloomy voice.

Bane kicked his legs in anger. "For the best! What is that to do with us? Centaurs are concerned with what has been foretold! It is not our business to run around like donkeys after stray humans in our Forest!"

Firenze suddenly reared on to his hind legs in anger, so that Harry had to grab his shoulders to stay on, while Ariel wrapped her arms tightly around Harry's waist.

"Do you not see that unicorn?" Firenze bellowed at Bane. "Do you not understand why it was killed? Or have the planets not let you in on that secret? I set myself against what is lurking in this Forest, Bane, yes, with humans alongside me if I must."

And Firenze whisked around; with Harry and Ariel clutching on as best they could, they plunged off into the trees, leaving Ronan and Bane behind them.

Harry didn't have a clue what was going on. "Why's Bane so angry?" he asked. "What was that thing you saved us from, anyway?"

Firenze slowed to a walk, warned Harry and Ariel to keep their head bowed in case of low-hanging branches but did not answer Harry's questions.

They made their way through the trees in silence for so long that Harry and Ariel thought Firenze didn't want to talk to them any more. They were passing through a particularly dense patch of trees, however, when Firenze suddenly stopped.

"Do the two of you know what unicorn blood is used for?"

"No," answered Harry, startled by the odd question. "We've only used the horn and tail-hair in Potions."

"That is because it is a monstrous thing, to slay a unicorn," said Firenze. "Only one who has nothing to lose, and everything to gain, would commit such a crime. The blood of a unicorn will keep you alive, even if you are an inch from death, but at a terrible price. You have slain something pure and defenseless to save yourself and you will have but a half life, a cursed life, from the moment the blood touches your lips."

Harry stared at the back of Firenze's head, which was dappled silver in the moonlight. Ariel stifled a gasp.

"But, who'd be that desperate?" he wondered aloud. "If you're going to be cursed for ever, death's better, isn't it?"

"It is," Firenze agreed, "unless all you need is to stay alive long enough to drink something else - something that will bring you back to full strength and power - something that will mean you can never die. Do you know what is hidden in the school at this very moment?"

"The Philosopher's Stone! Of course - the Elixir of Life! But I don't understand who -"

"Can you think of nobody who has waited many years to return to power, who has clung to life, awaiting their chance?"

"Voldemort," said Ariel grimly, remembering what Aunt Lia had said. Voldemort was not gone at all when the Killing Curse had rebounded off Harry. The Dark Lord had merely lost a corporeal body and was greatly weakened.

Harry winced, not at the name, but at the fact that Ariel was most likely right. "Curse him," he muttered.

"But you have defeated him once," said Firenze. Harry gave a start and Firenze continued, "Despite the Glamour Charm on you, I know who you really are. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone, because I also know you want it kept a secret."

"Thank you, Firenze," said Harry.

"Harry! Ariel! They're yeh are!" Hagrid came striding over towards them. "I've bin lookin' fer yeh for the past half hour! Oh, thank yeh for findin' them, Firenze."

Firenze inclined his head as Ariel and Harry slipped off his back. They thanked Firenze, who nodded and said, "Good luck, Harry and Ariel. The planets have been read wrongly before now, even by centaurs. I hope this is one of those times." With that, he turned and cantered back into the depths of the Forest.

Ariel quickly told Hagrid where the unicorn was. He ordered the two to stay where they were and then hurried off to examine the unicorn.

The rest of the Hogwarts eleven were waiting in the common room for Ariel and Harry to return, though they'd all fallen asleep. Hermione awoke, however, when the two entered and quickly woke the others. Ariel and Harry explained what had happened in the Forest. The others looked horrified.

Harry couldn't sit down. He paced up and down in front of the fire. He was still shaking.

"Snape wants the stone for Voldemort ... and Voldemort's waiting in the Forest ... and all this time we thought Snape just wanted to get rich ..."

"Stop saying that name!" said Ron in a terrified whisper, as if he thought Voldemort could hear them.

Harry wasn't listening.

"Firenze saved me, but he shouldn't have done ... Bane was furious ... he was talking about interfering with what the planets say is going to happen ... They must show that Voldemort's coming back ... Bane thinks Firenze should have let Voldemort kill me ... I suppose that's written in the stars as well."

"Will you stop saying the name!" Ron hissed.

"So all I've got to wait for now is Snape to steal the Stone," Harry went on feverishly, "then Voldemort will be able to come and finish me off ... Well, I suppose Bane'll be happy."

"But Voldemort doesn't even know you're really the Boy-Who-Lived!" pointed out Nick. "He thinks Harry Potter is living in America! Or somewhere other than Britain. If Voldemort got his hands on the Stone and regained a body and his powers, he won't be looking at Hogwarts to find you. He'll go elsewhere. And even if he discovered that Harry's in Britain, he still won't find you, because our house is under the Fidelus Charm! And unless Aunt Lia tells him the location, which she'll never do, he won't be going there to attack you."

"Nick's right," said Susan. "Other than your Aunt Lia, Valancy, and the ten of us, nobody knows who you really are. Oh, and Firenze and the Sorting Hat. But none of us is going to be telling V-Vol-Vol-Voldemort that you're Harry Potter."

Harry sighed. "I guess you have a point."

Hannah yawned and said, "Let's just go to bed and discuss this further in the afternoon." The others agreed and the eleven of them went upstairs to get some sleep.

Somehow Harry managed to get through all his exams, despite his worry that Voldemort would come bursting in any moment to go after the Stone. He also felt his scar pricking every so often and had nightmares of what he was sure was Voldemort going after his parents on Halloween almost eleven years ago.

When the final exam, History of Magic ended, Harry couldn't help cheering with the others.

"That was far easier than I thought it would be," said Hermione, as they joined the crowds flocking out into the sunny grounds. "I needn't have learnt about the 1637 Werewolf Code of Conduct or the uprising of Elfric the Eager.

Hermione always liked to go through their exam papers afterwards, but Ron and Nick said this made them feel ill, so they all wandered down to the lake and flopped under a tree.

The Weasley twins and Lee Jordan were tickling the tentacles of a giant squid, which was basking in the warm shallows.

"No more revision," Ron sighed happily, stretching out on the grass. "You could look more cheerful, Harry, we've got a week before we find out how badly we've done, there's no need to worry yet."

Harry was rubbing his forehead. "I wish I knew what this means!" he burst out angrily. "My scar keeps hurting - it's happened before, but never as often as this."

"Go to Madam Pomfrey," Hermione suggested.

"I'm not ill," said Harry. "I think it's a warning ... it means danger's coming ..."

Ron couldn't get worked up, it was too hot. "Harry, relax, Hermione's right, the Stone's safe as long as Dumbledore's around. Anyway, we've never had any proof Snape found out how to get past Fluffy. He nearly had his leg ripped off once, he's not going to try it again in a hurry. And Neville will play Quidditch for England before Hagrid lets Dumbledore down. no offense Neville."



Harry nodded, but he couldn't shake off a lurking feeling that there was something he'd forgotten to do, something important.

When he tried to explain this, Hermione said, "That's just the exams. I woke up last night and was halfway through my Transfiguration notes before I realised we'd done that one."

Ariel frowned. Though she and Harry hadn't always gotten along, she was the one that understood him the best, besides Nick. "Hermione, I don't think it's the exams. Harry, maybe you should write to Aunt Lia about this and ask for advice. She might have some idea of why your scar is hurting."

"Maybe," said Harry, looking up into the sky and seeing an owl flutter towards the school, a note clamped in its beak. He remembered the last note Hagrid had sent, regarding Norbert's hatching. Harry gasped, realizing something, and jumped to his feet.

"What's the matter?" asked Hannah. "Where are you going, Harry?"

"I've just thought of something," said Harry. He had gone white. "We've got to go and see Hagrid, now."

"But why?" asked Ernie, panting as he hurried to keep up.

"Don't you think it's a bit odd," said Harry, scrambling up the grassy slope, "that what Hagrid wants more than anything is a dragon, and a stranger turns up who just happens to have an egg in his pocket? How many people wander around with dragon eggs if it's against wizard law? Lucky they found Hagrid, don't you think? Why didn't I see it before?"

"Oh no!" gasped Susan, realizing what Harry was getting at.

Hagrid was sitting in an armchair outside his house; his trousers and sleeves were rolled up and he was shelling peas into a large bowl.

"Hullo," he said, smiling. "Finished yer exams? got time fer a drink?"

"Yes, please," said Ron, but Harry cut across him.

"No, we're in a hurry. Hagrid, I've got to ask you something. You know that night you won Norbert? What did the stranger you were playing cards with look like?"

"Dunno," said Hagrid casually, "he wouldn't take his cloak off."

He saw the three of them look stunned and raised his eyebrows.

"It's not that unusual, yeh get a lot o' funny folk in the Hog's Head - that's one o' the pub down in the villiage. Mighta bin a dragon dealer, mightn' he? I never saw his face, he kept his hood up."

Harry sank down next to the bowl of peas. "What did you talk to him about, Hagrid? Did you mention Hogwarts at all?"

"Mighta come up," said Hagrid, frowning as he tried to remember. "Yeah ... he asked what I did, an' I told him I was gamekeeper here ... he asked a bit about the sorta creatures I look after ... so I told him ... an' I said what I'd always really wanted was a dragon ... an' then ... I can' remember too well, 'cause he kept buyin' me drinks ... Let's see ... yeah, then he said he had the dragon egg an' we could play cards fer it if I wanted ... but he had ter be sure I could handle it, he didn' want it ter go ter any old home ... so I told him, after Fluffy, a dragon would be easy ..."

"And did he - did he seem interested in Fluffy?" Harry asked, trying to keep his voice calm.

"Well - yeah - how many three-headed dogs d'yeh meet, even around Hogwarts? So I told him, Fluffy's a piece o' cake if yeh know how to calm him down, jus' play him a bit o' music an' he'll go straight off ter sleep -"

Hagrid suddenly looked horrified.

"I shouldn'ta told yeh that!" he blurted out. "Forget I said it! Hey - where're yeh goin'?"

None of them spoke at all until they came to a halt in the Entrance Hall, which seemed very cold and gloomy after the grounds.

"We've got to go to Dumbledore," said Harry. "Hagrid told that stranger how to get past Fluffy and it was either Snape or Voldemort under that cloak - it must've been easy, once he'd got Hagrid drunk. I just hope Dumbledore believes us. Firenze might back us up if Bane doesn't stop him. Where's Dumbledore's office?"

They looked around, as if hoping to see a sign pointing them in the right direction. They had never been told where Dumbledore lived, nor did they know anyone who had been sent to see him.

"We'll just have to -" Harry began, but a voice suddenly rang across the hall.

"What are you three doing inside?"

It was Professor McGonagall, carrying a large pile of books.

"We want to see Professor Dumbledore," said Hermione, rather bravely, Harry thought.

"See Professor Dumbledore?" Professor McGonagall repeated, as though this was a very fishy thing to want to do.

"Why?"

Harry swallowed - now what?

"It's sort of secret," he said, but he wished at once he hadn't, because Professor McGonagall's nostrils flared.

"Professor Dumbledore left ten minutes ago," she said coldly. "He received an urgent owl from the Ministry of Magic and flew off for London at once."

"He's gone?" said Harry frantically. "Now?"

"Professor Dumbledore is a very great wizard, Stenson, he has many demands on his time -"

"But this is important."

"Something you have to say is more important than the Ministry of Magic, Stenson?"

"Look," said Harry, throwing caution to the winds, "Professor - it's about the Philosopher's Stone -"

Whatever Professor McGonagall had expected, it wasn't that. The books she was carrying tumbled out of her arms but she didn't pick them up.

"How do you know -?" she spluttered.

"Professor, I think - I know - that Sn - that someone's going to try and steal the Stone. I've got to talk to Professor Dumbledore."

She eyed him with a mixture of shock and suspicion. "Professor Dumbledore will be back tomorrow," she said finally. "I don't know how you found out about the Stone, but rest assured, no one can possibly steal it, it's too well protected."

"But Professor -"

"Potter, I know what I'm talking about," she said shortly. She bent down and gathered up the fallen books. "I suggest you all go back outside and enjoy the sunshine."

The Hogwarts eleven went upstairs to their common room to see if the portrait of the Founders had any advice and to plan what to do. However, the Founders didn't have much in the way of advice at all. Godric and Helga volunteered to keep an eye on Snape and notify them if they saw Snape going after the Stone, but otherwise that was all the Founders really could do.

Harry paced the room for several minutes and then came to a decision. "I'm going to stop Snape."

"What!" exclaimed Daphne. "Stop Snape? Are you insane, Harry?"

"No, I'm not," responded Harry. "Or would you rather have Voldemort return to power, Daphne?"

Daphne flinched at the name and shook her head. "Harry, are you sure it's Snape?" asked Nick. "You know Aunt Lia told us that Snape was friends with your mother until one day when he lost his temper and called her the 'm' word. Aunt Lia got into a shouting match with him over that, and your mother was mad too and ended her friendship with Snape."

"Well, whether or not it's Snape, the Stone can't fall in Voldemort's hands," said Harry. "So I'm doing this."

"I'm doing this too, Harry," said Justin bravely.

Harry opened his mouth to protest, but Ernie spoke first. "We're all doing this, Harry. You're not going alone."

"But it's dangerous!" protested Harry. "I can't let you guys do this!"

"If you think we're letting you stop Snape and/or Voldemort alone, you're crazy," said Susan firmly.

Neville nodded. "You could use our help. Professor Sprout's protection would most likely have to do with a dangerous plant. Well, Herbology isn't exactly your best subject. But it is mine, and I do know a great deal about plants, so you'd need me for that. And Hermione and Ariel know a number of spells and are the top students in the year. You'd need their help."

"And Ron knows a great deal of strategy, in case we need to plan something to get past one of the Defenses," said Daphne. "The rest of us will do what we can to help you through the other defenses. At the very least, we can give you moral support."

Harry looked around at the determined faces of his friends and foster siblings. He knew that it was pointless to try to argue them out of it. "Fine, you guys can help. Thank you for your support."

Four hours after dinner, Helga Hufflepuff appeared, panting slightly. "Qu-Quirrell went in the th-third floor corridor!"

"Quirrell?" asked Justin blankly. "You mean he's after the Stone?"

Helga shrugged. "I don't know, but it certainly looks like it."

"So we were wrong about Snape," said Ariel. She turned to the others. "Well, don't just stand there! We need to get moving! Harry, grab your Invisibility Cloak. I'll get Aunt Lia's."

When Harry got his Cloak, his gaze rested on the flute Hagrid had given him for Christmas. Harry pocketed it to use on Fluffy, since he didn't feel up to singing and was sure the others felt the same way too.

"Harry, Hermione, and Ron to one Cloak," ordered Ariel. "Justin, Daphne, and Susan to another. The rest of us will be under the Disillusionment Charm. I know how to cast it." She proceeded to cast it on Neville, Ernie, Hannah, Nick, and herself. The eleven of them set off.

When they arrived at the third floor corridor, they discovered that Quirrell had already gotten past Fluffy, judging from the door, which was slightly ajar, and the harp lying at Fluffy's feet. Harry began playing the flute as Ariel removed the Disillusionment Charms and Daphne opened the trapdoor. Nick took over playing the flute when Harry decided that he wanted to go down the trapdoor first. He landed on a large plant.

As it was a soft landing, Harry yelled up at the others to join him. Ron commented that it was lucky that the plant was there to break their fall. "You idiot!" burst out Neville, who along with Hermione, Daphne, Nick, and Justin were fighting their way to the wall and succeeded. "Just look at you!"

Harry looked and finally noticed the plant had started wrapping itself around him and the five others that weren't lucky enough to escape. Neville shouted, "Don't move! The plant is a Devil's Snare! Um, it likes the dark and damp, which means someone has to light a fire!"

"But there's no wood!" cried Hermione, wringing her hands.

Nick gave her a look. "Have you forgotten you're a witch?" he snapped as he pulled out his wand. He pointed at the Devil's Snare and attempted to conjure some flames, but didn't succeed. Hermione did the spell instead.

The Devil's Snare shrank back from the fire and the six were released. Harry got to his feet and said, "Thanks. Neville, you were right about my needing you guys. You knew about the Devil's Snare, and Hermione was able to conjure the fire to fight it."

"Yeah, after someone reminded her that she was a witch," said Nick. "Hermione, you really shouldn't lose your head in a crisis."

Hermione blushed and they continued on their way. The next challenge turned out to be flying keys. They had to find the correct one that would open the door leading to the next defense. As there were a limited number of brooms, Harry, Ariel, Nick, and Ron, the best flyers, were the ones to fly up and look for the right key. Harry was able to spot it and worked out a way to corner and catch it.

After catching the key and unlocking the door, they went to the next chamber, which contained a giant chess set. This was McGonagall's challenge. Ron, who was the best out of them at chess and knew strategy, took charge. He quickly saw that not all eleven of them needed to play. He took the role of a knight, assigned Harry to a bishop, Ariel to a rook, and Daphne to the other rook. Game commenced, which turned out to be exactly like wizard's chess.

In the end, for black to checkmate white, Ron had to allow himself to be taken. There was a storm of protest over this, but Ron pointed out that it was the only way if they were to get past and stop Quirrell. The others reluctantly gave in and Ron made his move and allowed the white queen to capture him. He was knocked out cold as a result. Shakily, Harry made his move and black won the game.

Neville, Hannah, and Daphne stayed behind to take care of Ron. The rest went forward. The next chamber was a troll, even bigger than the one they'd faced on Halloween. It was out cold, with a nasty lump on its head. Thankful that they didn't have to fight it, the seven of them continued on to the next room.

As soon as they entered, purple flames sprang behind them while black flames sprung in front of them. In the room was a table with a row of seven bottles and a scroll. Harry couldn't make much headway as to what the poem on the scroll meant, but Hermione and Ariel did. They worked out, using the poem, which bottle would take them forward and which would take them back. The potion bottle taking them forward was really tiny, however.

Ariel said firmly, "Harry and I will go forward. The rest of you go back and send a letter to Dumbledore. And Nick, send a letter to Mum, also."

"But Ariel!" protested Harry. "I can't let you do this!"

Ariel turned to look at him. "You're not stopping me, Harry. Or have you forgotten that Voldemort is my biological father? If he's in there with Quirrell, then I have the right to face him and do my best to help you stop him. I've read my mother's journals and know exactly what she was put through. Voldemort needs to pay."

Harry sighed. "I give up. You can come." He and Ariel hugged their friends and promised that they would do their best to stop Quirrell and return. Then Hermione, Susan, Nick, Justin, and Ernie drank the potion that would allow them to go back. Each clasped Harry's and Ariel's hand briefly, then one by one stepped through the purple fire. Ariel took a sip from the smallest bottle and handed it to Harry, who finished the rest of it (which wasn't much) off. The two stepped through the fire and came face to face with Quirrell.



Quirrell turned in surprise when Harry and Ariel entered. "Expelliarmus!" Ariel shouted. Quirrell's wand flew out of his hand and Harry caught it.

"So it's you," said Ariel. "Helga Hufflepuff said it was you going after the Stone instead of Snape."

"Snape?" replied Quirrell. "He does seem the type, doesn't he? Next to him, who would suspect p-p-poor st-stuttering P-P-Professor Quirrell?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Why are you working for Voldemort? I mean, Moldy Shorts." As he expected, the nickname infuriated Quirrell.

"How dare you call the Dark Lord that!" shouted Quirrell. "He's the greatest wizard ever!"

"Dumbledore is the greatest wizard ever," said Ariel coolly. "And Moldy Voldy can't be all that great if Harry Potter as a one-year old baby could defeat him."

Quirrell was beyond furious and shrieked, "How dare you, Miss Kennedy! Show some respect for the Dark Lord!"

"Why should I?" demanded Ariel. "So far, my father hasn't done anything to deserve my respect. First of all, he forced my mother to take part in Death Eater activities when she didn't want to. Then he basically committed adultery when he did a spell that enabled him to try to get her pregnant even though she was still married to Justus Malfoy. I'm surprised that she actually kept me rather than taking a potion that would have allowed her to miscarry. And there's also all the innocent people he and his Death Eaters killed, wizards and Muggles alike."

"You're the Dark Lord's daughter?" asked Quirrell in shock.

"Let me speak to her," said a hissing voice that Harry realized seemed to be coming from Quirrell's general area.

"Are you sure, Master?" asked Quirrell. "You might not be strong enough."

"I have the strength for this," said the hissing voice. Quirrell removed his turban and turned around.

Ariel gasped and Harry stifled a scream, for on the back of Quirrell's head was Voldemort. It was apparent that their Defense teacher had allowed himself to be possessed.

"See what i have become?" the face said. "Mere shadow and vapour ... I have form only when I can share another's body ... but there have always been those willing to let me into their hearts and minds ... Unicorn blood has strengthened me, these past weeks ... you saw faithful Quirrell drinking it for me in the Forest ... and once I have the Elixir of Life, I will be able to create a body of my own ... Now, it seems you are my daughter." He muttered a spell, doing wandless magic, and a gold glow appeared around Ariel. "So, you are my daughter. How did you find out?"

"I discovered some diaries written by my mother," snapped Ariel. "A week after you did your spell, she started having morning sickness and so did a spell that confirmed the fact that she was pregnant and was one week along. Since her husband had left two weeks ago on a mission for you, she knew that your spell had worked and you were the father."

"Well, my daughter, why don't you join me?" asked Voldemort. "You'll do well, I'm sure. You were sorted into Slytherin, after all."

"I may possess ambition and some cunning, but I never wanted to be in Slytherin in the first place! You remember my outburst during the Sorting. I don't hate Muggles or Muggleborns, and you are just a stupid idiot who's gotten in his head to be crazy like Adolf Hitler and go off killing a group of people you believe to be subhuman just like Hitler thought Jews and Gypsies and a few other groups subhuman and had them killed. Why don't you get it through your thick head that if wizards didn't marry Muggles or if there weren't Muggleborns, you'd all die out? And you can't just keep inbreeding to keep a line pure. Eventually things like madness and birth defects start appearing."

"Fine, Mudbloods can live, but they will be lower than pureblood and halfblood wizards," snapped Voldemort. "Now, are you joining me or not, Ariel?"

Ariel spat at him. "I'd rather be tortured and cut into a million pieces than join a maniac like you. Just because you happen to have sired me doesn't mean I acknowledge you as my father and do the awful things you do. You can roast in Hell if you don't repent of your deeds and ask God for forgiveness, but I don't care to end up there for being evil. I'm going to Heaven."

He laughed mockingly. "Oh, so you're religious? Well, religion's not going to get you anywhere."

"Yes it will!" snapped Ariel. "Which is why I'm not afraid of you! God is bigger and more powerful than you."

Harry sighed, for he had nothing to do now that Voldemort, and by extension, Quirrell, was occupied with Ariel. He didn't know why she had told Voldemort that she was his daughter, but it was certainly keeping him from looking for the Stone. He decided to just keep his mouth shut for the moment, unless Ariel needed his help.

"Well, if you're not going to join me, then I'm going to have to kill you," said Voldemort. "Then see where your God will take you now."

"If I die, I'm going to Heaven," responded Ariel confidently. "I've been mostly a good person, and I've accepted Jesus Christ as His Son and served God ever since I was seven."

Voldemort did a spell that enabled Quirrell to get his wand back. Then Quirrell turned and shouted, "Avada Kedavra!"

Harry pushed Ariel out of the way and ended up getting struck by the jet of green light. However, he didn't exactly die. Instead, something was forced out of his body, he wasn't sure what, and he found himself in a meadow. His parents appeared in front of him, smiling.

"Am I dead?" asked Harry, confused, for that was the only reason he would be seeing his parents.

Lily smiled and shook her head. "Not exactly, Harry. You can choose to come with us and go to Heaven, but I would prefer if you returned to your friends and foster siblings and went on to have a long life with Joyce, or should I say your Aunt Lia, looking after you."

James nodded. "She did a wonderful job raising you, Harry. If we couldn't be there, then we're glad that a nice and great friend of ours raised you. It's a good thing she took you away instead of leaving you to be brought up with your aunt and uncle like Dumbledore planned. He didn't realize that they were unfit guardians for you."

"Mum, Dad, why am I here then if I'm not really dead?" asked Harry.

"Well, when Voldemort tried to kill you, a fragment of his soul blasted off and entered you," explained Lily. "That might explain your scar. So when he tried to kill Ariel and you pushed her aside and took the Killing Curse instead, it only destroyed the soul fragment in you, not your body. I mean, you have a choice to go on, but you can also decide to live."

"I see," said Harry. "I would love to join you guys, but I think I'll go back. My foster siblings and friends need me, I think I'm the only person that can defeat Voldemort once and for all."

"Good," said James, smiling. "Keep your friends close to you, son. We're not completely sure, but I think one of your female friends will end up becoming your permanent love interest. And give Remus and Sirius our regards. Tell Sirius we don't blame him at all for convincing us to switch Secret-Keepers. We were the ones that decided to go along and Wormtail and Voldemort are the ones to blame for our deaths. And tell Remus not to push away when he finds love just because he's a werewolf. The lady in question won't care, so why should he?"

"I will, Dad," said Harry. "I love you, Mum and Dad." He hugged his parents and then allowed himself to be pulled back to life. He opened

his eyes to find that Ariel was trying to hex Quirrell, who either dodged them or threw up a Shield.

Harry scrambled to his feet and Quirrell turned to stare at him. "But you're supposed to be dead!" In his surprise, Ariel was able to Stun him. Harry walked over and touched Quirrell. To his surprise, the teacher's entire body jerked and his arm began crumbling. Harry snatched away his hand, then realized that his touch was somehow unbearable to Quirrell. Harry then touched Quirrell's face and he crumbled away even more. A spirit thing flew out of Quirrell's crumbling body and disappeared. At that moment, Harry fainted.

Ariel flew to his side and a minute later, Dumbledore appeared. He took in the scene and said calmly, "So you two stopped Voldemort from getting the Stone? Come on, I'll take Harry to the Hospital Wing. And you can tell me what happened right after I send a letter to your guardian. Your friends, including Ron, are fine. They were on their way to send a letter to me when I ran into them. Nicolas told me you two were facing Quirrell and I hurried here immediately to help."

After several minutes, Harry woke, but Madam Pomfrey insisted on having him stay for the rest of the night and part of the next day to fully recover. He told Ariel, who was also staying the Hospital Wing, what had transpired after he'd been struck by the Killing Curse.

When morning came, Aunt Lia, Valancy, Sirius, and Remus showed up. They got the whole story from Ariel and Harry. "Please don't do anything like this again!" exclaimed Aunt Lia. "When I got Dumbledore's letter, I almost had a heart attack. I'm proud of you for stopping Voldemort, but don't make a habit of it."

"We'll do our best," said Harry.

"So James really said that he and Lily don't blame me?" asked Sirius. "Makes sense. Moony, Prongs is right, you know. If you find love, don't push the person away."

Aunt Lia nodded. "Well, Harry, I think you should tell Dumbledore the truth about who you are, but ask him to keep it a secret for the time

being. I suppose he could also notify the heads of house, but have them sworn to secrecy too."

"Not Snivellus!" exclaimed Sirius, alarmed.

"It's Snape," said Aunt Lia severely. "And yes, he will be told as well. For Lily's sake, he will keep the secret and won't tell anyone until we give him leave. If you have a problem with that, then you can stay out of this and let Harry and me tell him. Valancy, why don't you go see Nick and meet his friends? Remus, could you accompany her?"

Remus nodded. "I'm proud of you, Harry and Ariel." He took Val's hand and the two left the Hospital Wing.

Dumbledore came in awhile later and Sirius and Lia told him the truth about Harry and removed his Glamor. Dumbledore was very surprised to hear it. Then Harry explained what had happened after he'd been hit by the Killing Curse, and Ariel told about how she'd discovered that Voldemort was the one who had sired her via a spell.

Dumbledore was even more surprised by this. "This is unexpected," he said heavily. "Well, I'll keep this secret, of course. And swear the Heads of House to secrecy when they are told about Harry Stenson actually being Harry Potter."

In the afternoon, Harry and Ariel were released from the Hospital Wing and they told their friends what had transpired after going through the black fire. The girls screamed when they found out that Voldemort was on the back of Quirrell's head and the boys gasped loudly and looked slightly sick.

The next day, Harry played in the Quidditch match against Ravenclaw. He caught the Snitch after fifteen minutes, winning the match and the Quidditch Cup for Gryffindor. Wood was delighted and hugged Harry through his tears of joy.

Finally was the feast and the awarding of the House Cup. Slytherin won, but after some last-minute points Dumbledore awarded (fifty points each to Hufflepuff for Nick, Susan, Hannah, Ernie, and Justin; fifty points each to Gryffindor for Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville;

and fifty points each to Slytherin for Ariel and Daphne), Hufflepuff and Gryffindor were tied for the House Cup.

The Slytherins (except Ariel and Daphne), were very unhappy at losing and breaking their winning streak. Gryffindor and Hufflepuff were extremely pleased at winning and Ravenclaw joined in the cheers and applause for they were also glad of Slytherin's downfall. Hufflepuff, in fact, was very happy, for it was the first time in seventy years that they'd won the House Cup, even if they were tied with Gryffindor for it.

The feast was wonderful and the Hogwarts Eleven thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

After that, the exam results came out. The Hogwarts Eleven had all placed on list of twenty highest scores, and in fact, Hermione was first, with Ariel coming in at a close second. Harry placed fifth, to his surprise, for he thought his worry over Voldemort and his scar hurting wouldn't have allowed him to do so well. Neville placed ninth, his Herbology mark (the one exam he beat all his friends in), making up for his dismal Potions one. He declared the only reason he'd done so well was because his friends had done a good job helping him revise for the exams.

Then all the students had packed up, notes were passed out reminding them not to do magic over the summer (except for the ones that were of age), and everyone boarded the Hogwarts Express. Lia, Sirius, Remus, and Valancy were waiting at King's Cross for Ariel, Harry, Nick, and Daphne. Lia gave the location of her house to the rest of the Hogwarts Eleven so that they could visit. Justin and Hermione, being Muggleborn, couldn't exactly Floo over, but if their parents let them, Lia said she would pick them up and take them to spend a couple of weeks at her house.

The group then said their good-byes and left with their respective parents or guardians.

Author's Note: Well, the first year is over. I will start a new fic, entitled "Harry's Second Year" whenever I have the time. I hope you enjoyed this fic, and don't mind that I had the Horcrux in Harry destroyed now.

This is an AU fic, after all, even if it is going to be compliant with Deathly Hallows.